

## ST STEPHEN, DEACON AND FIRST MARTYR

Acts 7. 51-60

Galatians 2. 16b-20

Matthew 10. 17-22

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Today, we have the privilege of celebrating the Feast of St Stephen, Deacon and First Martyr and patron of our parish church. We know from Acts 6, the chapter that precedes today's given New Testament reading, that Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to assist Christ's disciples in the daily distribution of food to widows in Jerusalem. A first glance at this text may lead us to believe that Stephen was chosen primarily to serve, and to wait at table; and indeed, he is called a 'deacon' in the Church because he fulfilled this servant-like role and was a forerunner of other Christians who joined the order of deacons.<sup>1</sup>

But to label Stephen as simply a deacon would be misleading. Other passages in the book of Acts inform us that Stephen was 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom' (6. 3); that he was 'a man full of faith' (6. 5); and that 'full of grace and power', he 'did great wonders and signs among the people' (6. 8). These latter indications about Stephen show us that his ministry was not simply that of a humble waiter (as godly as that position might be); his ministry was nothing short of prophetic. As a prophet, Stephen continued the work of our Lord's twelve disciples in Jerusalem. He was a Hellenist and Greek-speaking missionary whose authority was derived from the Twelve. Those of you who have visited the Vatican in Rome may remember that there is a lovely fresco in the Niccoline Chapel in the Apostolic Palace, showing Stephen kneeling before St Peter as he is consecrated in his new role.

---

<sup>1</sup> The word 'deacon' as it is used in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means 'servant'.

It is in the exercise of this prophetic role in Jerusalem that Stephen encounters opposition. As he preaches, full of wisdom and the Spirit, he is criticised by other Hellenistic Jews, who have come from another synagogue located in Jerusalem, but whose members were from far-away places like Alexandria, Libya, Turkey and Asia (6. 9).<sup>2</sup>

These Hellenistic Jews secretly instigate others to accuse Stephen of having spoken blasphemous words against God and Moses (6. 11). Stephen is arrested and then taken for a formal hearing before the Sanhedrin, the official Jewish court. At that hearing, the same 'leaders of the people', who arrested, tried and arranged Jesus's death<sup>3</sup> and who also resisted the preaching of his apostles by arrest, trial and beating<sup>4</sup> now sit to hear the proclamation of Stephen, who has the 'face of an angel' as he speaks (6. 13). Even Stephen's accusers and opponents cannot fail to see that he is a messenger from God.

The speech that Stephen gives before the Sanhedrin is the longest single speech recorded in the book of Acts. In spite of its length, it is very compact, because it covers a huge amount of material. In his speech, Stephen goes into great detail and shows that throughout their history, the Jews have rejected God and have been unfaithful to him. And Stephen finishes his long discourse by accusing the Jewish leaders of continuing to be hard of heart; of disobeying and resisting the Holy Spirit; and of killing the prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus before they killed the Messiah himself.

It is these final accusations that cause the members of the Sanhedrin to drag Stephen out of the city and to stone him to death. Once again, the Jewish leaders resist the Holy Spirit, who this time is speaking through Stephen his servant; and Stephen

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen is a pivotal figure who anticipates the future success and conflict of the Christian mission among the nations.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lk 20-23).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Acts 4-5.

becomes the latest in a long series of prophets who suffer rejection and die at their hands.

The parallels between Stephen and Christ are striking. Both our Lord and Stephen had grace and power; they both worked wonders and signs among the people; they both did not hesitate to enter into dispute with those who challenged them; and they both were arrested and brought to trial before the Sanhedrin. Both Jesus and Stephen had false witnesses accuse them; both were taken outside the city to be executed; both asked forgiveness for their murderers; and as both of them died, they prayed for God to accept their spirits.

But there is yet another way in which we can link Stephen to Christ, and ultimately link ourselves to Stephen and our Lord. Allow me to explain.

We have already noted that Stephen was a Hellenist, a Greek-speaking Jew. In Greek, of course, his name was not Stephen, but rather *Stephanos*. *Stephanos* was not only a Christian name used by the Greeks; it was also a noun that described the garlands or wreaths that were awarded to winners in the ancient Greek games. These wreaths or garlands signified crowns of victory.

Interestingly, when you look at the other passages of the New Testament in which the Greek word *stephanos* is used, you make a very significant discovery. *Stephanos* is used in three of the gospels to describe the plaited wreath that was made of thorns and which was placed on the head of Jesus at his trial.<sup>5</sup> To quote Matthew's gospel: 'They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a *crown*, they put it on his head.' By his very Christian name, Stephen was automatically associated with our Lord's passion; and in his life, ministry and death,

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mt 27. 29; Mk 15. 17; Jn 19. 2, 5.

Stephen, the first of all Christian martyrs, had the honour in sharing the humiliation, rejection and execution that Christ personally knew.

The cross of thorns that was given to Christ is a very strong symbol. For the governor's soldiers who mocked our Lord, it was a sign of ultimate disrespect: they took a symbol of royalty and majesty and turned it into something that was painful and degrading. For Christians, however, the crown of thorns is a reminder that Jesus was, and is, a king. He who was the Suffering Servant and who suffered for our sakes is still the conquering Messiah-King, the King of King and Lord of Lords. Indeed, as he died, Stephen was given a heavenly vision in which he saw Christ, the exalted King, crowned with glory and honour,<sup>6</sup> standing at the right hand of God.

There is further symbolism embedded in the crown of thorns. When Adam and Eve sinned, bringing evil and a curse upon the world, part of the curse on humanity was that the ground of the earth was cursed; and from it thorns and thistles were brought forth.<sup>7</sup> Unknowingly, the Roman soldiers took an object of that curse and fashioned it into a crown for the one who would ultimately deliver us from evil and that curse.<sup>8</sup> The crown of thorns was intended to be a mockery; and yet it is an excellent symbol of who our Lord is and of what he came to accomplish.

But there is a final blessing for all of us in Stephen's story. Not only by his name and by his life and death was he to be for ever associated with the passion of our Lord; his name *stephanos* also occurs elsewhere in the New Testament, and is used in these instances to describe the eternal blessedness that will be *given to us*, as a prize to the genuine servants of God and the Messiah.

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Heb 2.9.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gen 3. 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gal 3. 13.

In the epistle of James, for example, we read that the Lord has promised to give a ‘*crown of life*... to those who love him’ (1. 12). Peter, in his first letter, promises us that ‘when the chief shepherd appears, (we) will receive the *crown of glory* that never fades away’ (5. 4). And St Paul writes that ‘from now on there is reserved for me the *crown of righteousness*, which the Lord...will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing’<sup>9</sup>.

Today, we praise God for the ministry and example of St Stephen, who not only became the first to wear a martyr’s crown, but who also reminds us even today of that heavenly *stephanos*, that divine wreath that will be our blessed inheritance in glory.

Amen.

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. 2 Tim 4. 8. See also Rev 2. 10; Rev 4. 10.