

DIFFERENT VIEWS OF ST STEPHEN

2 Chronicles 24. 20-22

Acts 7. 51-60

Matthew 10. 17-22

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

On the Feast of St Stephen, the Lectionary gives us an appointed set of Scripture readings which varies only slightly from year to year: there are some options, but the readings always include the passage we have just heard from the seventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and a gospel reading from Matthew. This is not surprising, because the book of Acts is, after all, our primary source of biblical information about our patron saint who was both a deacon and the first martyr.

However if we go back in time, prior to the development of the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1994)¹ and the *Roman Catholic Lectionary* produced after the Second Vatican Council (1969), we see that the appointed readings for St Stephen's Day were very different.

They always included passages about Stephen from the Book of Acts, of course, but they would not be simply limited to Acts chapter seven; and then, there were two other significant changes.

The first significant change was in the gospel reading. Rather than choosing the passage from Matthew 10, it was customary in the Roman rite to read verses 34 to 39 from Matthew 23, which includes that well-known phrase pronounced by our Lord: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers

¹ and, for that matter, the *Common Lectionary* (1983) and the *COCU* (Consultation on Church Union) *Lectionary* (1974)

her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ But the Ambrosian liturgy, a Roman Catholic liturgy used initially in Milan and more widely afterwards,² used a completely different gospel passage, taken from Matthew 17 (verses 24-27). In that text, the collectors of the temple tax come to Peter and say, ‘Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?’ (And Peter replies) ‘Yes he does.’

When Peter then relates this incident to Jesus, Christ says to him, ‘...so that we do not give offence to them, go to the lake and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to (the collectors) for you and me.’

Now we might wonder, why on earth was this gospel was chosen to honour St Stephen?

From the 4th century, starting with St Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310-365), the first fish in this gospel episode was none other than St Stephen, the ‘first fish to be caught by the hook of St Peter’s preaching’.³ According to St Hilary, who was a Doctor of the Church and who later became the Bishop of Poitiers, St Stephen then ‘preached the glory of God, beholding the Lord Christ in his passion’.

St Ambrose, who became bishop of Milan roughly a decade after St Hilary’s death, agreed with this interpretation. As St Ambrose wrote, ‘In this ship, Peter is fishing, and is ordered to fish now with the net, now with a hook. A great mystery! For this seems to be a spiritual fishing, by which (Peter) is ordered to cast the hook of teaching into the world, so that he might raise up the first martyr, Stephen, from the sea, who contained the price of Christ within himself; for Christ’s martyr is the Church’s treasure. Therefore, the Martyr who was the first of us to come to heaven

² The Ambrosian Rite is a Latin Catholic liturgical Western Rite used in the area of Milan. The Traditional Ambrosian Rite is the form of this rite as it was used before the changes that followed the Second Vatican Council.

³ *Commentary on Matthew*, cap. 17, 13.

from the sea, ... is lifted up not with a net, but with a hook, so that by the stream of his blood he might be lifted up to heaven. And in his mouth was the treasure, when he spoke of Christ in his confession.²⁴

There is a second significant change that we need to be aware of when we consider the readings that were formerly used on the Feast of St Stephen; and that is, some of them were surprisingly not taken from Scripture at all. For example, readings were taken from what is called the *Breviary*, that is, a liturgical book that contained readings to be read at different hours of prayer during the day. When the *Breviary* was read on a saint's feast day, for example, it was not uncommon for the *Breviary* to contain various lessons about the saint's life, or death.

In the case of St Stephen, the *Breviary* contained some interesting lessons about the finding of the remains of the first martyr following his death. I quote:

‘In the year 415...Gamaliel, the teacher of St Paul,...appeared in a vision to a priest of Jerusalem named Lucian, on three successive Fridays, and named the location of the burial. Gamaliel further revealed that he himself had taken charge of Stephen's body after his martyrdom, and buried him on his property near a village that bore his name, Caphargamala; and that he himself was later buried in the same place...Gamaliel ordered Lucian to tell what he had seen in these visions to Bishop John of Jerusalem, who then sent the latter to investigate the site.

‘In due course, the graves were discovered, with inscriptions to confirm the identity of the persons buried therein. John was then attending a synod at Lydda...; on receiving word of discovery from Lucian, he hastened to the site, attended by two other bishops and a large multitude of people. When the coffin of St Stephen was opened, the ground shook, and an “odour of such sweetness and fragrance came

⁴ *On Virginity* 120.

forth therefrom,...such that (those present) thought they were in the delight of Paradise”; seventy-three persons were healed of possession and a great variety of physical ailments. The relics were then transferred to a church on Mount Sion, which Lucian’s letter, the first source of this story, anachronistically describes as the place “where Stephen was ordained as an archdeacon.”

And finally, the readings for the Feast of St Stephen included not only passages from the *Breviary*, but also writings from the early Church Fathers such as St Augustine, who wrote this in his book *The City of God*:

‘When the bishop was bringing the relics of the most glorious martyr Stephen to the waters of Tibilis, a great concourse of people came to meet him at the shrine. There a blind woman entreated that she might be led to the bishop who was carrying the relics. He gave her the flowers he was carrying. She took them, applied them to her eyes, and immediately saw. Those who were present were astounded, while she, with every expression of joy, preceded them, pursuing her way without further need of a guide. Lucillus, the bishop of Sinita, in the neighbourhood of the colony of Hippo, was carrying in procession some relics of the same martyr, which had been deposited in the castle of Sinita. A fistula under which he had long suffered...was suddenly cured by the mere carrying of that sacred burden.’⁵

These are only two of the several miracles which St Augustine attributes to the relics of St Stephen in this chapter; he goes on to list several others, and more still which took place in the towns of Calama and Uzali, which also had relics of the Saint, miracles of which he had personal knowledge. Augustine wrote, ‘I cannot record all the miracles I know; ...for were I...to record exclusively the miracles of healing which were wrought in the district of Calama and of Hippo by...the most glorious Stephen, they would fill many volumes.’

⁵ *De Civ. Dei* 22, 8.

St Stephen, First Martyr and Deacon in the Church of God, pray for us and inspire us.

Amen.