

FIRST READING: Apostles 7:51–8:1a

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

Stephen said to the people, the elders, and the scribes: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always oppose the Holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They put to death those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. You received the law as transmitted by angels, but you did not observe it.” When they heard this, they were infuriated, and they ground their teeth at him. But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him together. They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”; and when he said this, he fell asleep. Now Saul was consenting to his execution.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 31:3cd-4, 6 and 7b and 8a, 17 and 21ab.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Be my rock of refuge, a stronghold to give me safety. You are my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake you will lead and guide me.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Into your hands I commend my spirit; you will redeem me, O LORD, O faithful God. My trust is in the LORD; I will rejoice and be glad of your mercy.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your kindness. You hide them in the shelter of your presence from the plottings of men.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

GOSPEL: John 6:30-35

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

The crowd said to Jesus: “What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: *He gave them bread from heaven to eat.*” So Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” So they said to Jesus, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 3rd Tuesday of Easter

After I had finished mass one Sunday at my first parish, I stood outside greeting people as they were leaving to go home or to breakfast. One person approached me and said, "Father, you are a powerful preacher. Why don't you give them a good old 'hell-fire and damnation' sermon?" "Who are 'them'?" I asked? I explained, "Preaching is about the gospel, the good news of salvation and not about hell. Jesus died to save sinners, of whom," I added, "I am the first, not someone else; I have to hear the gospel first as I preach it." I have held this belief since I was a kid. Jesus came to save sinners not to condemn them. The justice of God comes from the infinite, eternal and unconditional love that is God.

So I wonder, why was Stephen's preaching so bitter, accusatory and judgmental? I learned as a kid to avoid talking politics and religion at family gatherings. It led only to conflict and hard feelings. It helped me and my family to enjoy one another's company better; which was the reason we gathered in the first place. Stephen seems to be poking the bear with a stick and with purpose. Did he seek to provoke the crowd and die? I have always read this passage, as an adult, with this disquiet. So, could Stephen have found another way?

If I were to place myself in the crowd, what would I feel? Imagine someone coming to preach, here, at Sunday mass claiming to be Catholic and adding some strange, new belief in preaching. Wouldn't that offend us? Wouldn't we feel outrage? We revere Stephen as the first martyr for the faith, but he didn't get to be a saint until after he died. While he lived he was a sinner like you and me. He saw a vision of God, enthroned in heaven with Jesus beside God's throne. He wasn't able to see a wider vision of God within the crowd of people; God was there too, Jesus still at his side. God gives faith as a gift and in God's own time and way. It's never by the grace of the preacher. Good witness never guarantees the transmission of faith. Perhaps the will of God did not intend for the crowd to convert. As it happened, Stephen's witness, martyr is the Greek word for it, was for the young man named Saul, not for the crowd.

This is the first appearance of the man who would eventually become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles and the Church's greatest preacher. Who could know? Not everyone valued his witness either, though his words persist to this day, contained in his letters. We believe because of him all those centuries ago. How this God-awful story has turned out, proclaims both the mystery and glory of God. No one could have predicted how the Holy Spirit would work through this event. As I reflect on the course of my own life, with all its ups and downs, here I am by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit. The response of the Psalm, "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit," has great relevance and reverence. The mystery of God indeed.

Show us a sign! How often have people prayed or demanded this from God? I know I have. Sometimes we can hope or expect to have the heavens open and know true clarity. How often does it happen? It can and does, not often though. It happened for Stephan just as he died. Faith is a way of knowing. Through it we know God and God's presence. Having faith is our sign. Lord, I believe; help my unbelief, may be a better prayer to pray when we demand to see a sign. We see with eyes of faith.

What was the sign Jesus actually gave to the gathered crowd? It was himself. Why couldn't people see it? Remember that these people did not yet experience Jesus cross, resurrection and ascension nor did they experience the Holy Spirit. I can have some compassion for those

people who couldn't make a leap of faith in Jesus. What if I stood up and said, "I am the bread of life..." You'd think I was nuts! The manifestation of his nature as God was yet to come.

Clearly I'm not God and Jesus, having a full human nature, looked like some one just like me. Jesus words only make sense to us because we already believe in him. We don't have to make any leap of faith. God has already given us the gift of faith. To us, Jesus is the sign of God's love, salvation, life and sustenance. We live in a post Easter and post Pentecost Church. When we gather together with Jesus in our midst, we become the Church, Jesus' mystical body and blood. We share and receive the Eucharist, the sacrament of Jesus' body and blood. What is a sacrament? It is an outward sign of an inner reality. We receive the Eucharist as the sign of who we have already become. This is subtle in its power and mystery. We live the words Jesus spoke in this gospel. Today, we are the sign of the bread of life.

It's always easier to know the hand of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit in reflection as in Acts today. We know that Saul became Paul as a direct result of the stony death of Stephen. The rock of refuge we can see from a new perspective. Good can come from evil in the perspective of our faith. In the present, and as we experience the mass, we can know the bread of life. We are Jesus' body and blood in the perspective of our faith, now.

May our hunger and thirst for Jesus be fulfilled in Word, sacrament and our witness.

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