

Feast of St. Stephen, the Protomartyr
December 26, 2004

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✧ Jesu juva ✧

GAINING THE CROWN

II Chronicles 24:17-22; Acts 6:8-7:60; Matthew 23:34-39

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Just yesterday we celebrated one of the most joyous feasts of the Christian Year: the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Today we commemorate a death. It seems strange right on the heels of Christmas; and yet the three days following our Lord's Nativity all involve martyrs of one sort or another. Today is St. Stephen's Day, tomorrow St. John's, and the next Holy Innocents. Today we commemorate a martyr who was both willing to die and did; tomorrow is dedicated to the Apostle who was willing to be martyred and was not; and the following day the infants are remembered who were not willing in their martyrdom and yet were slain. Over time these martyrs became known as the "Companions of Christ", accompanying His nativity year after year for nearly as long as the Birth of Christ has been celebrated on its own day.

And if you think about it very long, that which seems strange at first begins to make sense. Our Lord says to the Jews referring to those who are His companions by faith, "Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation." And today we see the first after our Lord's Resurrection to be murdered on His account.

The Church, however, has since ancient times considered the death of the martyrs to be their birth into everlasting life. And so today we celebrate, as it were, not only a death, but another birthday. St. Augustine once preached:

"But the birthday of the Lord which we celebrated was the one on which he was pleased to be born; the birthday we are celebrating of His servant is the one on which he was crowned. The Lord's birthday we celebrated was the one on which he received the garment of our flesh; His servant's birthday which we are celebrating is the one on which he threw aside the garment of his flesh. What we celebrated on the Lord's birthday was His becoming like us; what we are celebrating on His servant's birthday is his becoming as close as possible to Christ. Just as Christ, you see, by being born was joined to Stephen, so Stephen by dying was joined to Christ."

St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 314

Not only may we draw comparisons between Stephen's birthday and Christ's Nativity, but also between Stephen's birthday and our Lord's Passion. Stephen, following the example of His Lord and filled with the Holy Spirit was "full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." But just as Christ's works were not received by the leaders of the Jews, so also

Stephen's testimony to Christ was rejected. And as false witnesses rose up against Jesus, so also they rise up against Stephen saying: "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They even charge Stephen with the same supposed blasphemy with which his Savior had been charged: "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

But where Christ is silent before His accusers, fulfilling the ancient prophecy that He would be silent as a lamb is before its shearers, Stephen speaks at great length. He makes an eloquent defense of His faith. He preaches the Law to the Jews and shows them that they were no different than their rebellious ancestors who sold Joseph into slavery and who rebelled against Moses and the prophets. But He does so that He may also proclaim Christ to His accusers. And as they gnashed their teeth against him, "he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'" And they would listen no longer and stopped their ears against the Gospel. And then they took up rocks and began stoning the preacher.



Yesterday we heard from the Gospel of John concerning the coming of Christ: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God." Today we see the evidence of this statement. For the Jews into whose race Christ was born, rejected Him as they rejected the prophets the Lord had sent previously. And now they reject those who preach Christ after Him as well. Thus our Lord's lament: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." And still our Lord calls out to that people, and still most are unwilling to listen and reject His Gospel.

And we also see the blessedness of those few who do believe, to whom "He gives the right to become children of God". For Stephen, though being rejected by his murderers, is approved and received by Christ. Stephen sees His Lord standing at God's right hand and following His Lord's example prays: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit;" a prayer that was almost instantly answered. Yes Stephen received all that the Lord promised. He was received as a son into the Father's house, and now wears the crown of triumph.

Now he is an example to us. In St. Stephen we see one who faithfully believed on Christ and who disdained this world in favor of Christ. He could have walked away from his martyrdom. He could have denied his Lord and preserved his earthly life. But He would not. He loved Christ better than this life. And trusted that His Lord's blessings were of an infinitely greater magnitude than anything he could gain in this place. And thus He faithfully confessed, even in the face of those who hated Jesus and who would kill him for it.

Here we see the love of Stephen; love for Christ, and love for his fellow man. For Stephen loved not just in Word, confessing with his lips; but in deed, praying for His murderers with his dying breath; calling out like Jesus from His cross “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” How different the cries of Stephen from the cries of the prophet Zechariah, the one calling for mercy, the other calling for the Lord to repay. And yet both find their fulfillment in Jesus who repaid the sins of the Jews by suffering for them in His own flesh that He might have mercy on all.

And finally we see Stephen as an example of a blessed death. How can stoning be blessed you ask? It is not the manner of death that I am speaking about here, for who would like to be stoned, but rather Stephen’s manner in approaching it. He, though a sinner, was justified by Christ and believed. And with the knowledge of Gospel in the forefront of his mind, He faced death confidently and serenely, never wavering in His conviction.

As Stephen was, so we ought to be. And that which made Stephen what he was is also given to us by God. For our Lord Jesus loves each of you just as He loved Stephen. He has died for you too, forgiven you your sins, won for you a crown of life in heaven. And now He has made each of you who believe a son in His Kingdom. He has brought you forth through the birth of Holy Baptism, has filled your ears with His Gospel, has fed you with His flesh and His blood. And He will continue to bestow His grace upon you so long as you live if you only remain with Him by faith.

Now we have celebrated the feast of Christmas, the feast in which He was joined to us by taking on our flesh. May we also, like Stephen, seek to be joined to Him who has gone ahead to prepare our place, living our lives in Christ’s presence, and when the day finally comes facing our birth into eternal life with faith and courage. In the words of our hymn:

“Would to God that I might even
As the martyred saints of old,
With the helping hand of heaven,
Steadfast stand in battle bold!
O my God, I pray Thee,
In the combat stay me.
Grant that I may ever be
Loyal, staunch, and true to Thee.”

Our Lord grant us such grace that we cling to Christ above all else, that we also receive the crown. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧