

December 26, 2010

SOLI DEO GLORIA

Good Shepherd, Novi

*Festival of St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr*

**MATTHEW 23:34-39 / ACTS 6:8 – 7:2,51-60**  
**FEAR NOT WHAT MEN CAN DO TO YOU;**  
**REJOICE IN WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR YOU.**

*In the name + of Jesus.*

We are only one day past Christmas Day, and already things seem out of sorts. The lessons speak more of anger than joy. The paraments are not the white of purity, but the red of blood. We expect our focus to be birth, but instead it is death. It seems strange, if not wrong. The day after Christmas is the festival of St. Stephen, deacon and martyr. It is a reminder that the Christian life is not all holly, jolly and “Ho, ho, ho!” Life in Christ means life under a cross. We do well to remember that even at the most festive times of the Church Year. And the Festival of St. Stephen, the day after Christmas, reminds us of just that.

The early Christian Church was determined not only to preach the gospel, but also to care for those in need. However, the burden of the charity work was falling upon the apostles. As a result, the apostles were devoting their time to the care of widows and orphans while the preaching of the gospel was being neglected. So, **the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business...”** (Acts 6:2,3) Stephen was one of the seven who were appointed deacons in Christ’s church.

Stephen did more than distribute food to widows and orphans. We are told that **Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.** (Acts 6:8) But even greater than that, Stephen preached the gospel to people. In this way, people were not merely fed or healed; they were forgiven of their sins and snatched from hell.

Stephen declared that salvation is not found in buildings or in good behavior or in sacrifices or in blood lines. Salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. He is the temple where God dwells with his people. He has done the good which God demands of mankind. He is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is the one whose holy blood cleanses us from all sin. **Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.** (Acts 4:12)

It is appalling to see how violently people have reacted to this message of hope and peace. The Sanhedrin who had condemned Jesus also condemned Stephen who preached him. They wanted no Savior. They wanted to be saved by their goodness, not by God’s. They dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. So these men, who were assured of their own goodness, murdered Stephen for the dastardly crime of preaching.

While it is appalling, it is nothing new. Jesus Christ has always invoked hatred from the world. King Herod was threatened by the baby Jesus once he learned that Jesus was no ordinary baby. So, he sought to kill him. Later, when Jesus preached that there is no way to the Father except through him, other Jewish leaders plotted to kill him. And here Stephen, who preached in the name of Jesus, became a target of their fury.

The world can put up with a Jesus who is nothing more than a cute baby. For many, Christmas is about nostalgia and nothing more. But as soon as you say Christmas is only about the Savior, which is Christ the Lord, people become unglued. As soon as you proclaim Jesus is the world's only hope of being saved, the world despises him. Atheists campaign against him. The politically correct want no mention of him. And even Christians cringe that they will be rebuked for singing hymns or uttering his name.

Jesus spelled out the problem in our gospel: **“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!” (Matthew 23:37)** The problem is not that God fails to love us. It is not that God has no room for sinners. It is not that God's promises are unreliable. The problem is that sinners are not willing to repent of their sinfulness. The problem is that sinners are unwilling to forsake all hope in themselves and cast all their hope on Jesus.

Jesus longs to gather sinners under his protecting arms, but sinners are not willing. We want to be the masters of our own lives. We want to sin and not feel bad about it. We want to engage in evil and believe that we are still good. We will follow Jesus and confess him when it is easy; but when we face trouble for our faith, we take our eyes off of Jesus and keep them on this world. We prefer to live in the dying world than to die in the living Savior.

St. Stephen was willing to suffer all things, even death, rather than forsake his Savior. St. Stephen was willing to give up everything because he knew that outside of Jesus, there is nothing. Outside of Jesus, there is no hope. There is no peace. There is no forgiveness. There is no comfort. There is no heaven. There is no life. Oh, it may look like the world has it all – especially as we see them party away through Christmas into New Year's. But the world has no answers, no hope, and no peace. People still sin. People still die. There is still sadness and loneliness, pain and tragedy. Where are the answers for such things?

Dear Christian, your new-born Savior is the answer for such things. Yes, pain and tragedies will come in this world. They will even come because you confess Jesus, as was the case for Stephen. But you need not fear. And you should not fret. Fear not what man can do to you. Rejoice in what God has done for you! Jesus Christ has come so that the greatest of tragedies, the sins of the world, will be undone. Jesus has come so that you may avert the worst of pains – the torment of hell. Jesus takes away loneliness, because he will never forsake you. Instead, he unites you to all the saints on earth and hosts of heaven. He even takes away death because he has risen from the dead.

He proclaims to you God's peace, which means that God is pleased with you no matter what anyone else says about you. He fills you with joy, which means that you know you have a place in heaven. He grants you comfort, which means you keep focusing heavenward, even if wicked men pelt you with insults or with stones.

Fear not what man can do to you. Rejoice in what God has done for you! What is the worst than man can do to you? They may slander you and sully your reputation. But if they do, they cannot change what God's decree: that you are a child of the Most High God. They may take your property and possessions. But if they do, they will only take what will be destroyed by fire. They may make your life miserable. But if they do, you know that you have a glorious future. They may even kill you. But if they do, you know

that your life rests in Jesus' hands. The body will be raised imperishable, just as Jesus' crucified body was.

For you have a Savior who still longs to gather you under his wings, to embrace you, to comfort you, to nourish you, and to protect you. He is your refuge from evil in all of its forms. Even in the face of brutal and bitter death, Jesus grants you peace and hope and joy. Not even death shall separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And if you should suffer to the point of bloodshed, remember that the blood of Jesus has already saved you. So fear not what man can do to you. Rejoice in what God has done for you!

**In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**