

7th Sunday of Easter - C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

It doesn't seem like it, but the season of Easter in the liturgical calendar is longer than the season of Lent. There are five Sundays in the Season of Lent, plus Passion Sunday and here we are at the 7th Sunday of Easter. Time flies when you're having fun.

1st Reading - Acts 7:55-60

On the 4th and 5th Sundays of Easter we heard of Saint Paul's first missionary journey and how he and Barnabas were rejected by the Jews and persecuted, but the Gentiles were attracted to them. Last week, we heard of the Council of Jerusalem where it was declared by Peter, and subsequently the whole Church, which Gentile converts did not have to become Jews prior to being baptized and becoming Christians. Today we hear of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen was one of the first seven deacons; having been ordained to provide for the needs of the community in Acts 6:1-6.

In the events leading up to today's reading we find that Stephen, in addition to his duties in the daily distribution of food, did great wonders and miracles among the people. When he was brought before the Sanhedrin, he also proved to be quite an orator; his address to them is recorded in Acts 7:2-53. Some of our fundamentalist Protestant brothers and sisters criticize Catholics because they call their priests "father" citing Matthew 23:9 "Call no man your father on earth." When you read Saint Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin, you will find that he calls other men "father" twenty-seven times; but it is not for this that he is condemned and stoned. He is stoned because he points out how the Jews have always persecuted the prophets and have even betrayed and murdered the One sent to fulfill all those prophecies.

⁵⁵ But he [Stephen], filled with the holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God

Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin included the statement to the effect that Solomon built a house for God (the Temple) but God doesn't live in houses made by men. Then he quoted Isaiah 66:1 "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." His looking to the sky above (to heaven) affirms that the location of God's glory is in heaven.

and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,

The right hand is the place of honor for the most trusted; the person at the right was closest to the sword hand and could prevent its being drawn in the case of a betrayal.

⁵⁶ and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Luke 22:69 says that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. The standing may be because the Lord is welcoming His martyr.

⁵⁷ But they cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears,

So they could not hear what Saint Stephen was saying.

and rushed upon him together. ⁵⁸ They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him.

Stoning outside the city was prescribed for blasphemers in Leviticus 24:14 and Numbers 15:35-36. Luke presents prophet-murder imagery in Luke 4:29; 13:34; and 20:15. Not only have they killed the messiah, they now kill the messenger who tells them of it.

The witnesses laid down their cloaks

Two witnesses were required to pass the death sentence. Recall also from the story of the woman caught in adultery that the witnesses had to take an active part in the execution; this explains why they removed their cloaks.

at the feet of a young man named Saul.

This is Saul's first appearance. The man who is to become the Apostle to the Gentiles appears at the precise point where the mission's outward movement from Jerusalem begins.

⁵⁹ As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ 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.

Like Jesus on the cross “Father forgive them they do not know that they are doing.” Stephen lives the life of Christ right to the end.

2nd Reading - Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20

Every week since the 2nd Sunday of Easter we have heard our second reading from the book of Revelation. We have heard of Saint John's vision of the heavenly liturgy and of the coming of the Heavenly Jerusalem in the end times. By “end times” I don't mean the end of the world as such, but the end of the world as the Jew perceived it – an event which took place in A.D. 70 when the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed; marking the end of the Old Covenant and the continuation in glory of the New. In our reading on the Second Sunday of Easter we heard the words declared “I am the first and the last.” As we hear our reading

today, which comes from the closing verses of the book of Revelation, we hear this familiar theme again.

[I, John, heard a voice saying to me:]¹² “Behold, I am coming soon. I bring with me the recompense I will give to each

At the end of the world sinners and saints are to receive their particular judgment (see Isaiah 40:10 also).

according to his deeds.

Notice it doesn't say faith, but conduct – the way the faith is lived out. (see also Proverbs 24:12; Jeremiah 17:10; Romans 2:6).

¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

The first associated with the last signifies totality; the creator and the end of everything.

¹⁴ Blessed are they who wash their robes

Their sinfulness has been removed, they are a new creation. Those who have persevered in their lives and who have made their baptismal robes white in the blood of the Lamb by availing themselves of forgiveness of sins which Jesus made available (see John 20:21-23).

so as to have the right to the tree of life

Located in the Garden of Eden. Those who are there have the tranquility of Adam and Eve before the fall.

and enter the city through its gates.

The heavenly Jerusalem where God dwells. They have free access to God.

¹⁶ “I, Jesus, sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches.

It is Jesus Himself who guarantees the oracles contained in the book of Revelation. He now recalls two messianic prophecies that He Himself fulfilled:

I am the root and offspring of David,

See Isaiah 11:1ff.

the bright morning star.”

Among the ancients, a symbol of domination. Probably an allusion to Numbers 24:17, which late Judaism interpreted as a messianic prophecy.

¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride

The Holy Spirit and the Bride of Christ, the Church triumphant – all the prophets and saints.

say, “Come.” Let the hearer say,

This is to be the prayer of the entire church. This is the personal duty of each Christian assisting in the liturgical assembly.

“Come.” Let the one who thirsts come forward,

Christ asks each one of us not only to welcome Him when He comes, but to actively approach Him.

and the one who wants it receive the gift of life-giving water. ²⁰ The one who gives this testimony says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

Salvation history, the central object of Holy Scripture, is to be consummated by the triumphal return of Christ. Through our faith, hope, and actions, the Christian testifies that he is included in the history of salvation.

Gospel - John 17:20-26

As the season of Easter draws to a close, the Church takes us back to the upper room and the teachings of Jesus just prior to His arrest. Having just prayed for Himself (John 17:1-5) and for His disciples (John 17:6-19), Jesus now prays for all believers; for us!

[Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed, saying: “Holy Father,] ²⁰ “I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,

The Church of all time. All who owe their faith to the apostolic testimony.

²¹ so that they may all be one,

Unity of faith, of belief. The horizontal dimension of unity encompasses the command to love one another.

as you, Father, are in me and I in you,

The vertical dimension of unity, the perfect unity because Jesus and God are One.

that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. ²² And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one,

The unity of the Church is the incarnation of the shared life and love of the Father and the Son.

²³ I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.

When the Church is true to its destiny and preserves the unity in love that has been given it, it is the continuation of Christ as mediator and revealer of God.

²⁴ Father, they are your gift to me.

The Church.

I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

The culmination of that new unity would be sharing the Glory that Jesus had with the Father from the beginning. The foundation of that relationship between Jesus and the Father is their mutual love. Until Christians have come to be with God as Jesus is, they have not fully experienced the reality of Jesus' relationship with God.

²⁵ Righteous Father, the world also does not know you, but I know you, and they know that you sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them."

God, who alone is perfectly just, will deal rightly with those who have separated themselves from the unbelieving world and have accepted the revelation of God in Christ. The life that Christ has shared with His Church the Father will permit Him to share continually through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The departure of Jesus for His glorification means that He will be forever with His Church in the divine presence and love.