

20. April 2021

“St. Stephen and the Mercy of God”

Acts 7:51-8:1

'You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears. You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Upright One, and now you have become his betrayers, his murderers. In spite of being given the Law through angels, you have not kept it.' They were infuriated when they heard this, and ground their teeth at him. But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand. 'Look! I can see heaven thrown open,' he said, 'and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.' All the members of the council shouted out and stopped their ears with their hands; then they made a concerted rush at him, thrust him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses put down their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul. As they were stoning him, Stephen said in invocation, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and said aloud, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And with these words he fell asleep. Saul approved of the killing. That day a bitter persecution started against the church in Jerusalem, and everyone except the apostles scattered to the country districts of Judaea and Samaria.

It is a bad state of affairs when one constantly resists the Holy Spirit, as Stephen here accuses the elders and scribes. The consequence is that one not only cannot recognize the truth, but also does not want to recognize it at all. We hear in the text that Stephen testifies that he sees Jesus at the right hand of God. At that moment they raise a loud cry and cover their ears. This is also symbolic: they neither want to see nor hear, but on the contrary: they act on Stephen just as they did on his Lord. It is a terrible consequence of the closed heart!

Can people even come out of such a state? It is difficult, and one could say that it is almost impossible for man. What would have to happen for a closed heart to reopen itself to the grace of God? *“Things that are impossible by human resources, are possible for God.” (Lk 18:27)!* So the hope remains that God will still find a way to open the closed hearts.

Stephen shows us a way. He, who proclaimed the truth without hesitation and who did also not hesitate to name those responsible for the death of the prophets and of the Lord, was at the same time ready to pray for them at the hour of death. In this, too, he followed his master, who even on the cross still prayed that his murderers should be forgiven (*cf. Lk 23:34*).

That is probably the great hope that remains!

Jesus himself and those who follow him offer their lives for salvation. This is not only the renunciation of revenge and retribution, but a deep grasp of God's mercy. The mercy of God does not want to punish, but to spare. It seeks man until the last moment, even the hardened souls. Precisely those are in danger of not attaining blessed eternity - and God is struggling for them.

The wonderful message is that the Spirit of God can awaken this mercy and struggle for man also in the hearts of the faithful. But in a certain way He can only do this if the believer knows about the terrible consequences of sin.

We can see this with Stephen. He clearly sees and also names the guilt of the elders and scribes, and yet he prays that their sin will not be counted against them.

A "false mercy" which does not see the guilt of man or relativizes it so much that it no longer burns and calls for forgiveness, will no longer be able to perform such high acts like Stephen. A false sight of mercy confuses and makes the salt stale.

It is precisely the proclamation of judgment with the final consequence, which entails unforgiven guilt, that is a wake-up call to perceive the seriousness of our life.

That we humans can count on the mercy of God gives us a last hope in all situations. This is justified and therefore does not let us sink into despair. Mercy triumphs over judgement (*cf. Jas 2:13*). However, in order to grasp and classify this mercy correctly, it must not be confused with general human compassion or general solidarity. It is an overwhelming light in the heart of our beloved Father.