

2. May 2022
The triumph of light

Acts 6:8-15

Stephen was filled with grace and power and began to work miracles and great signs among the people. Then certain people came forward to debate with Stephen, some from Cyrene and Alexandria who were members of the synagogue called the Synagogue of Freedmen, and others from Cilicia and Asia. They found they could not stand up against him because of his wisdom, and the Spirit that prompted what he said. So they procured some men to say, 'We heard him using blasphemous language against Moses and against God.' Having turned the people against him as well as the elders and scribes, they took Stephen by surprise, and arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. There they put up false witnesses to say, 'This man is always making speeches against this Holy Place and the Law. We have heard him say that Jesus, this Nazarene, is going to destroy this Place and alter the traditions that Moses handed down to us.' The members of the Sanhedrin all looked intently at Stephen, and his face appeared to them like the face of an angel.

How much malice precedes Stephen's death! When hearts are closed, they can go very far... They are practically incapable of perceiving the state they are in. The signs and wonders that God worked through Stephen thus became a threat to them. Instead of recognising these miracles as a gift of God, through which he confirmed Stephen's mission and Jesus himself, they begin to argue with Stephen.

They do not think twice even when they see the wisdom and the Spirit with which he responded to them. Instead of questioning where this wisdom came from, their hearts become even more closed and the evil that has imprisoned them is revealed. So they seek false witnesses and riot the people. Perhaps they think that Stephen must be silenced at any cost, to prevent the people from falling into error. Perhaps they have the idea that, in this case, any means is legitimate (as if the end justifies the means).

But when man is corrupt within himself and does not resist evil, then it will control him as it pleases. And when malice is not fought, it will lead to a bitter end. In this case, we know that Stephen will be stoned, with no one to protect him.

If we meditate and internalise this passage, not just as a story describing an event that took place in another time, we must ask ourselves: What can we learn from this?

We are confronted here with two opposing extremes. On the one hand, there is the closed heart, which makes it possible for malice to dominate a person. On the other hand, we see the shining face of St. Stephen, who is unjustly accused.

Evil is presented as if it is he who has the last word. He has the majority of the rioting people on his side, and he will apply to Stephen's case the same justification he had already used to put his Master to death.

Stephen, for his part, suffers injustice, thus testifying that Jesus is the Master and Lord in every situation. Indeed, evil is not able to take away the radiance of Stephen's face; it cannot suppress the witness that transforms the situation from within. Stephen's extraordinary witness echoes the glorious affirmation that resounds particularly in these days of the Easter Season: *"Where is your victory, O death? Where is your sting, O hell?"* (cf. 1 Cor 15:55).

Darkness wants to devour the light; but it does not succeed. One way or another, the light always breaks through. In this case, it shines on the face of the first martyr for Jesus' sake. Later, when Stephen is being stoned, the light shines in his words: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* (Acts 7:60).

God's love has conquered death and annihilated the plans of evil.

In contrast to the extreme evil, the extreme love of God is manifested in Stephen, who is filled with the Holy Spirit. It is this love that overwhelms everything and shines the brightest!

Thus, this passage from the Acts of the Apostles should serve as both a warning and a comfort to us. As a warning, that we should guard our hearts, giving no place to any

poison; and that we should be vigilant that our hearts are not closed, except in the face of sin. If we are not vigilant, we could reach a state in which we no longer succeed in mastering malice, so that it settles in and leads us to evil deeds.

This state does not necessarily come at once; rather, the ground is prepared for it when we become accustomed to wrong thoughts and feelings without resisting them.

But, as we said, today's reading should also be of comfort to us, because we see that evil does not have the last word and does not triumph. God assists His own in tribulation and will never abandon them.

In the midst of the darkness of all this malice, Stephen's face shines "like the face of an angel". So we too can be sure that the light of the Lord will shine in our lives, if we serve him with a sincere heart and keep watch over our inner state. We may not notice this light ourselves, but other people do. Even Stephen's enemies, sitting in the Sanhedrin, *"saw his face as the face of an angel"*.