

12. May 2025

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

“The speech and martyrdom of St. Stephen”

Stephen's speech, recorded in chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles, is a synthesis of God's salvific history with the people of Israel. It is worth reading in its entirety. Because of its length, in today's meditation we will limit ourselves to reading it from verse 51 onwards.

Acts 7:51-60,8:1a

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting to his death.

Stephen's speech is by no means lacking in clarity. In strong words he points out the guilt of those of the people of Israel who always resist the Holy Spirit. In His goodness, God had sent them the prophets, through whom He gave them instructions and reminded them how to live pleasingly in His sight. When necessary - that is, when the Israelites went astray - God urged them insistently to conversion.

As we have already heard in John's Gospel and now in the Acts of the Apostles, hearts - especially those who have the responsibility of leading people - are often closed so that the Holy Spirit cannot work in them. Then they act as they did with Jesus and later with the apostles: they murder God's messengers.

Prophets and saints are not recognised by those whose father is the devil (Jn 8:44). On the contrary, they are a threat to them because they bear witness to God and speak in His name. *"Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?"* asks Stephen, to which he himself replies: *"They killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it"*.

With these words Stephen pronounced his death sentence. His opponents could no longer hear him and began to threaten him. When he told them that he saw the heavens opened and Jesus at the right hand of God, they could no longer bear it, for such a vision confirmed the truth of the apostles' message and meant judgment for those who were closed to it.

So they did again what their fathers had done before: they murdered God's witnesses, in the case of Stephen, by cruelly stoning him to death.

For his part, Stephen did what the Lord did on the cross: he asked that this sin not be imputed to them. In this way, the inexhaustible goodness of God, who wants to forgive even murderers if they are willing to convert and accept His love, was manifested in him.

Here we encounter our holy faith in all its depth. To ask forgiveness for those who murder you is only possible because of the grace that God gives to man. It is to plunge into the ocean of love that emanates from the Heart of God. By sending His Son Jesus Christ into the world as a man, the Father has sent us this love to bring us the redemption that we could never achieve on our own.

All of us who follow Jesus are called to allow this love to work in us so that, like St Stephen, we may be able to forgive our enemies.

Today's passage concludes by saying that "Saul was consenting to his death". This is the first mention in Scripture of the man who was to become the great Apostle of the Church. Here he is presented to us in shadow and as an accomplice in the murder of Stephen. But, as we will soon see, God will bring him out of the darkness and into His wonderful light. To do this, he will first have to meet Jesus and be converted to Him.

There are those who believe that the blood shed by Stephen helped Saul become the Paul we love so much and for whose ministry we are so grateful. Perhaps it did! God knows. For today we are left with Stephen's radiant witness and awe at the zeal with which the early Church proclaimed the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Meditation on the day's reading: <https://en.elijamission.net/the-guidance-of-the-holy-spirit-2/>

Meditation on the day's Gospel: <https://en.elijamission.net/the-voice-of-the-lord-2/>