

Sermon for St Stephen's Day, December 26 - Text: Acts 6:5b-15.

Love Costs

Today we remember St Stephen, the first Christian to give the ultimate witness to faith in Jesus with his own life. Over the history of the Christian church, Stephen has been remembered on December 26 or 27th. That seems quite strange, especially so soon after the joy and happiness of Christmas celebrations.

And yet, to reflect on the martyrdom of a disciple of Jesus immediately after reflecting on the gentleness and great joy of that same Jesus in a manger certainly confronts us with the reality that **faith in this child of God costs us nothing at the same time that it costs us everything.**

Nothing: Yes, it was God who came to us; who took the initiative, who established a new reality of joy and life forever beyond death in his Son, Jesus, the king of kings;

Everything: bearing witness to his promises, place and power can lead to **rejection, discomfort, pain** and even the shedding of blood. The love of God costs. It costs God dearly in the giving up of his Son, and it cost us as we **remain faithful** to his love for us.

Stephen was the first disciple of Jesus to live faith in Jesus in extreme persecution; in the real threat of death. He is the original model-martyr; the first one to give his life for the gospel of Jesus.

In the book of Acts the name of St. Stephen occurs for the first time when Luke tells of the appointment of the first deacons (Acts 6:5). There was some among the community of faith who were not happy about the unfairness of the distribution of resources from the community's fund.

Let's get this in historical context. Stephen was named among the managers of food distribution in the early church. Long before violent persecution broke out against Christians there was already social ostracism. Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah were usually cut off from their families. As a result, the believers depended on each other for support. The sharing of homes, food and resources was both practical and necessary.

To deal with the problem, seven men were selected and specially ordained by the Apostles to take care of making sure the poor and disadvantaged were looked after in the community. Of these seven deacons, Stephen, is the first mentioned and the best known.

Stephen's name is Greek and suggests he was one of those Jews who had been born in some foreign land and whose native language was Greek.

Stephen certainly seems to be an educated young man. His speech before the hostile religious council is one of a young man who knows his Scriptures, the Law, and the Temple Liturgy. Some have said that Stephen may have been a fellow pupil with Saul of the great Jewish teacher of the day, Gamaliel. This text is also the first time that we hear of that other student, Saul of Tarsus. He was the one who oversaw and approved of Stephen's death.

Stephen seems to stand out from the other seven deacons. Indeed, he doesn't seem to do much "deaconing"! He does powerful wonders of grace among the people, Luke tells us (6:8).

Some are not amused. As with Jesus, they gather some corrupt associates and set Stephen up for a mock trial before the same men who thought they had finished off this Jesus fellow.

Stephen's speech is one that really presses all the "buttons" of these powerful but very anxious men. It is all beginning to look and sound the same as it did with that fellow Jesus!

Stephen re-tells the grand story of God's dealing with his people. It is the very story of the people accusing Stephen. They are more Jewish than he and here is this Greek-speaking person telling them their own story! Hot button number 1!

As with all great speeches of any self-respecting rabbi, we have to start with Abraham. We hear of God's promises to Abraham to make a people for himself. Then we hear of Jacob's son, Joseph, another young man who was falsely accused and left for dead by his own brothers. But by faith in the Lord, became a great instrument of blessing for the world in Egypt.

Then it is on to Moses. God acted to save his people from evil and oppression through Moses in Egypt, even though the people doubted God's hand at work through Moses from the beginning.

And then it is on to the big one: the temple. God gave a pattern of a temporary, transportable tabernacle where he met with his people in the desert. Not even that great king David built the temple in which we now sit, says Stephen. Indeed, God doesn't dwell in temples or in one country. There is no "holy land" or any great cathedral that can contain God, or to which God is limited, is what Stephen says. There is no one people to which God must remain limited. Stephen is a living sign of this!

And then the telling charge of this bold disciple of Jesus to the power-brokers of his day. "You are stiff-necked, stubborn, blind, arrogant people, just like all those in the past who rejected the grace of the Lord!" he declares.

Stephen goes on... "You have rejected and willingly sought to destroy God's grace in the person of Jesus; the Righteous One, whom God sent to save you and all people, Greek-speaking like me, or Hebrew-speaking, like you. You say I have not kept the law; you say I am a law-breaker and deserve shame and death – you are the ones that are breaking the good and perfect law of God – the law of love - a law that is meant to protect the people and serve them. You are law-breakers!"

Oh boy! This young man is speaking God's Word at any cost to himself. He is speaking the truth and the truth is not wanted.

That is how it is with us sometimes; both ways. We are called to speak the truth of God's law and the good news of Jesus and people listening reject it out of hand.

Or, the truth is spoken to us by a concerned friend, or a stranger sometimes, or a preacher or even an enemy, and for lots of reasons we just do not want to hear it.

But the Lord continues to speak – not out of malice but out of love. The law, which accuses us of our sin, our deafness to God's word, our lack of understanding and trust in the Lord, kills the old Adam in us. Not to leave us dead to God, but to create faith in Jesus, the love of God with and for us, as have just celebrated.

Stephen paid the ultimate price for faithfully speaking God's word. Many have since and as many do now. As he did, the Lord was with him and gave him what the name *Stephanos* means in Hebrew – "crown".

A quick look at the Amnesty International website and some other Christian networks like Barnabas will show us that people in Africa, Latin America, Africa, Indonesia and many other continents and countries are being imprisoned, oppressed, tortured and murdered because they are disciples of Jesus Christ.

We would do well to remember St Stephen and all those who are oppressed because of their faith in Christ. We would do well to ask the Lord to give us an extra measure of faith by his Spirit to give faithful witness to the love of the Jesus given to us. Both to receive God's word – law that kills and shows us our need of a Saviour, and gospel, that breathes God's life into our hearts and minds - and then to live and tell of him all the time – no matter what personal cost might be involved.

Remember Stephen; read that Acts speech and count yourself among the stiff-necked people – and then pray to your Lord and Saviour, Jesus. Ask him to forgive you, renew you, strengthen you for this year. Ask him to give you courage to pay the **price** and make the **faithful witness** in your sphere of people and trust him for the crown of life that he has already given you, now in part, and one day in full.

A closing encouragement for us is that this death of one of God's people and the following severe persecution ushered in the beginning of the greatest missionary work in history. Phillip went south, Peter went north. Some of Stephen's associates went further north. Then, Saul, who would be confronted by the Jesus for his persecution of Christians and made new, would begin the great witness to the known world – to all people, to all ethnic groups, and to all languages.

Eventually this skirmish in one of the most isolated and insignificant parts of the Roman Empire would reach Rome itself and a few hundred years later, Christianity would be the dominant faith in the world.

We need the faith of Stephen in our time when other faiths are making great headway. These faiths are faiths in all sorts of things – mostly in ourselves - not faith in the only true God of Stephen – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We need boldness to give faithful and gracious witness in our time.

Lord, give us this faith that changes the world and brings your kingdom of love and mercy for all. Amen.