

Sunday 14th May 2014

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

White



Collect

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Acts 7:55-60 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Stoning of Stephen

⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together^[a] at him. ⁵⁸ 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. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Footnotes: a. or *rushed with one mind*.

COMMENT: The brutal end of the story of Stephen’s martyrdom introduced the young man Saul, soon to be converted as the apostle Paul. The main character of the whole narrative of The Acts of the Apostles, however, was not any one of the named or unnamed apostles who carried the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. That hero role belonged to the Holy Spirit. This story told of the first Christian martyr to illustrate how challenging and dangerous that mission would be. Stephen was one of the seven Hellenistic leaders in the Jerusalem church chosen to assist the apostles. Their primary role was as stewards commissioned to distribute food to the needy (6:1-6). Stephen, however, had a special gift for preaching and soon ran afoul of the Sanhedrin, the supreme religious court of the Jews, (6:8-15) where he was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death by stoning.

This story presented the first evidence in Acts that the Spirit was motivating the apostolic church to reach out beyond the narrow confines of Judaism and Palestine to the vast Hellenic world with new insights of who Jesus Christ was for them too. It was there that the church was to find its earliest successes as a result of its first missionary efforts.

Throughout its history the church has had a tradition honouring human heroes, and yet the real agent of God's mission in the world is still, as always, the Spirit of God who was in Christ.

John 14:1-14 English Standard Version (ESV)

I Am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life

14¹ “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God,^[a] believe also in me.
²In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?^[b] ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to where I am going.”^[c] ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.^[d] From now on you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. ¹²“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. ¹³Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If you ask me^[e] anything in my name, I will do it.

Footnotes: a. or *You believe in God.* b. or *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.* c. some manuscripts *Where I am going you know, and the way you know.* d. or *If you know me, you will know my Father also, or If you have known me, you will know my Father also.* e. Some manuscripts omit *me.*

COMMENT: The several long discourses in John's Gospel always raise the question whether these are actual words of Jesus or only attributed to him by the Gospel writer. Christian scholarship almost universally accepts attribution and that most likely that the passage contains remembered sayings of Jesus. Either way this passage contains important theological

truths as valid today as for the second or third generation of believers for whom it was written. Most notable in the passage is that Jesus is the only way to God. However, claims in this passage for Jesus and Christian faith cannot be isolated from the rest of this discourse, especially the life of obedient love which Jesus commanded his disciples to follow. This, perhaps, is the clue to a more satisfactory interpretation of the uniqueness of our faith.

Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16 *In te, Domine, speravi* Grail Psalter

℟ Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

¹ *For the Choirmaster. A Psalm of David*

² In you, O Lord, I take refuge.

Let me never be put to shame.

In your justice, set me free,

³ hear me and speedily rescue me. ℟

Be a rock of refuge for me,

a mighty stronghold to save me,

⁴ for you are my rock, my stronghold.

For your name's sake, lead me and guide me. ℟

⁵ Release me from the snares they have hidden

for you are my refuge, Lord.

⁶ Into your hands I commend my spirit.

It is you who will redeem me, Lord. ℟

¹⁶ My life is in your hands, deliver me

from the hands of those who hate me.

¹⁷ Let your face shine on your servant.

Save me in your love. ℟

Glory be to the Father and to the Son

and to the Holy Spirit,

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,

world without end. Amen.

COMMENT: Do not the words of this cry for deliverance recall the previous passage in Acts 7 describing the death of Stephen? The Hebrew Scriptures were the only scriptures the early Church knew. There was no New Testament then. It was this backdrop against which the early Christians understood their vocation, and naturally underpins the gospel story. Some scholars believe that the narration of Stephen's death consciously keeps in mind the words of this psalm; equally, others may argue that it would be natural for a Jew or convert to utter the appropriate words of a psalm.

We know little or nothing about the origins of the psalm. It appears to have been a composite of three different laments (verses 1-8; 9-12; 13-18) with a final liturgical hymn of thanksgiving (verses 19-24). Some of its notable phrases and metaphors have parallels in other psalms. The opening verses are almost identical to Psalm 71:1-3. Verses 6-8 referred to a conflict with those who worship idols, a frequent act of faithless apostasy in ancient Israel and still today as we make material things our gods. The adversarial attitude throughout the psalm almost reaches the point of paranoia before being sublimated to a profound expression of trust in verses 14-15. Perhaps the greatest encouragement of this psalm – which would have been an inspiration to those early Christians – is to live and die by trust in God.

Short Preface

But chiefly are we bound to praise you because you raised him gloriously from the dead. For he is the true paschal lamb who was offered for us, and has taken away the sin of the world. By his death he has destroyed death, and by his rising to life again he has restored to us everlasting life.

Post Communion

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life: grant us to walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth, and to share his risen life; who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. **Amen**

Blessing

The God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**