

ST. STEPHEN

ACTS 6:8-7:2A, 51-8:1A

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It is a tragedy to be sure. A young man struck down in the prime of his life by a wanton act of violence, an enraged mob that is violently lashing out in ignorance and anger.

We know so little about Stephen. Early in the life of the Christian church, there was a division of labour. The apostles became so busy with the administration of the community, with distributing food to the widows and with solving the other problems of a growing organization that they decided to break the ministry into two roles or orders.

The apostles would confine themselves to a ministry of word and preaching. A new group called deacons would be concerned with waiting on tables and have a ministry of service.

We follow this same breakdown today: pastors are called to a ministry of preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments. Deacons live out their ministry by meeting people's needs and serving the church. Today in our church we have social workers, teachers, nurses, youth workers and others who not only are trained in their respective professions but who are also ordained as deacons for service within the church.

Stephen was a trendsetter in many ways. He was one of the first of the deacons in that early church. Along with six other young men, the early church chose Stephen, "a

man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" as its first group of deacons (Ac 6:2-5).

Stephen's gifts and abilities seemed more pronounced than just waiting on tables. He performed great wonders and signs among the people and preached a very compelling sermon just before his execution.

Most of that sermon is omitted from our reading this morning because of its length. But in it Stephen makes some very interesting points:

First, he uses the entire history of the Hebrew Scriptures to show that God does not live in temples but is found anywhere and everywhere. This was a challenge and an affront to the power of the Jewish leaders who used their control of the Temple to oppress the people and force them to conform to their teachings and to only worship in the temple.

Secondly, Stephen used the history of the Hebrew Scriptures to show how leaders of all times and places consistently and persistently persecuted and killed God's prophets whenever those prophets questioned or challenged this abuse of power.¹

Finally, Stephen pointed out to the leaders how futile their attempts really are: they want to protect their power and control and so they betray and murder, but in the end, it is God who reveals and demonstrates his power and glory.

Therefore, Stephen, one of the first deacons becomes the first Christian martyr for the faith.

It seems tragic, a death so unnecessary and unfair. But here again God's power shines forth. For in that murderous horde that day was one particularly vile and zealous murderer: Saul would become the Gestapo of this persecution, going from town to town, church to church,

¹ <http://www.cin.org/saints/stephen.html>

house to house with warrants to arrest anyone who was thought to be worshipping Jesus Christ.

Saul did not participate in this stoning, but he held the coats of those who did. Witnessing a mob scene that violent has to leave a mark on any person. Witnessing a stoning where the victim does not lash out in anger, fear or defence but instead responds with grace, love and forgiveness has to soften even the hardest heart.

In time, Saul would stop fighting the will of God but submit to it. One day while traveling to Damascus to arrest more Christians, Saul would feel the love of God flood through his body too and his life would be changed. Saul would change his name to Paul and would become the most important missionary of the Gospel to the Greek-speaking world. In the end, Paul would himself face martyrdom for the faith he shared with others.

Stephen's martyrdom was a tragedy, but in the words of St Augustine, 'If Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have gained Paul.'

God does not cause evil and injustice, but as is so often the case, God reveals his power by transforming evil intentions into divine opportunities, and by redeeming our sins through his love and forgiveness.

This too is a message we learn from Stephen.