

CRADLE TO THE CROSS (Feast of Stephen Dec. 26th)

There is one day which can unite us. Whatever you're faith or creed. Canadians stand proud. And on that day they say "Spend". They think "Deal". They mark on their calendars "Boxing Day". So runs the sales pitch on the radio. To that I say. Well think again. Today isn't so much "Boxing Day" or let's pretend it is Christmas for the In-laws day, at least in the Church Year. For the practicing Christian, today is the feast of St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. The paraments turn to red. The mood becomes serious. Some might wonder whether we could somehow avoid it and say, pretend it is Christmas day all over again or December 27th or 28th? "And then some in the Church might wonder if it can't be avoided then "why not"?"

If it were the 27th we would commemorate St. John the Apostle who was a living martyr on an island called Patmos. December 28th in which we commemorate the little children two years and under who were slaughtered by the evil King Herod. December 28th is called the Feast of the Holy Innocents. So we have three consecutive days during the Christmas season, December 26th, 27th, and 28th during which we must deal with the theme of martyrdom. If we are faithful to the historic church year, then it's pretty hard to avoid. Even for years when we celebrate the pretty generic sounding 1st Sunday after Christmas, we turn to consider Simeon and his prophecy to Mary "And a sword shall pierce your own soul also". We cannot escape the cross bearing nature of the Christian life. The cross it should be not just hard to avoid. It is impossible to avoid.

The cradle cannot be separated from the cross. Our faith ought not to be divorced from works. We Lutherans firmly believe that good works are still necessary. They may not be necessary for our salvation but they are still necessary as a sign or natural consequence for those possessing salvation. In that spirit of the relationship between faith and works we also celebrate a confirmation this morning of Archana Paul. It is an opportunity to rejoice in baptism to be certain, but it is also, as the confirmation liturgy suggests, an opportunity to confess faith publically before men. "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 10:32),

And it is in the public confession of faith that the real work of the Christian begins. Even in Canada, depending on the context of your confession and testimony a cross is borne. In many times and places confession of faith and martyrdom go hand in hand. This was certainly the case with St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr.

So today I would like to briefly tell you the story of St. Stephen. The setting is the city of Jerusalem in about the year 30. The story of St. Stephen is found in the book of Acts, chapters six and seven. Stephen was chosen to be the head of the deacons. He was a very good man and the Bible also says that he was full of both the Holy Spirit and love. The early Christian community chose him to take care of the money. This money was to be used to take care of the widows, orphans and poor people. In every good story and in every normal human situation, a conflict arose, and a conflict arose around St. Stephen. A group of Jews were very jealous of Stephen and they plotted and instigated to have Stephen killed. They made false accusations against Stephen and they brought him to a trial in a Jewish court.

Stephen finally stood up and made a long speech in his own defence and that speech goes on and on in chapter six. Remember that he was a Deacon and not a Pastor. His calling was not preaching

per se but nevertheless as all Christians are called upon to do “able to give testimony in whom they believe”.

His speech is so long that it takes more than two pages in our Bible to hear the history of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and the other Old Testament heroes. Stephen recited a history of Jewish people being disobedient to God. History is important because here we see God entering into real life. Stephen’s testimony is about to get much more real. God isn’t content to intervene in some long ago past. He raises us up to be his spokesmen in the present. And this is what the Lord leads Stephen to do.

All of a sudden, in verse fifty-one of chapter seven, it all changes. All of a sudden this long, disarming speech gets nasty and Stephen says: “*You stiff necked, inflexible people. You people are hard hearted and your hearts are not soft to God. You people have wax in your ears and you don’t hear the words of God. You people, your fathers persecuted the prophets, and now you betrayed and killed the Messiah. You people, you are the ones who killed Jesus.*” Well, Stephen’s bluntness made everybody mad when he said, “*You people.*” He had said, “*You Jesus killers. You prophet killers. You worship your religious traditions and interpretations more than God.*”

There comes a point when niceties must well end. There comes a time when we must call a sin a sin. Stephen was speaking to those who ought to have known better. So he must speak sternly to them. There comes a time for us to display anger with sin. There will come a time when Archana won’t be speaking to the converted when she professes her faith. At those times we bear the cross. At those times we may be called as Stephen was and do more.

When the Law is given, anger is often the result. Nobody likes to be told they are sinners. Pastors often run into trouble especially at funerals if they mention that the deceased was a sinner. I know that I have. Yet that is what we all are “*forgiven sinners*”. “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*”. But the anger surpassed the human and took on the unleashing of demons. Sometimes that happens also. The Jewish leaders were ordinarily a cautious sort. They had to be. They lived under the watchful eye of Rome. Still according to scholars who have studied this sort of thing the Jewish councils were ordinarily a cautious sort of group. They had the equivalent of the Governor’s phone placed just by the pit of execution. A man stood at the hall of justice with a white handkerchief. A fast horse at the ready. If any witness was produced even at the last moment when the convicted was even on his way to the execution the flag was waved, the horse dispatched, and the accused brought back for further trial (Farrar, *Life of Saint Paul*). But caution was thrown to the wind that day. No calls came on the governor’s phone.

If there was to be any mercy that day - if there was to be any cautious approach to Stephen it would not come. For his last testimony in a sentence was more powerful than what he could have said in the previous two chapters. And already they were grinding their teeth in anger. But what would come next was to send them into total frenzy.

(Stephen), full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Stephen had seen the Son of Man. Now this was a title of the Messiah that at once conveys the message of Christmas – the incarnation of our Lord. He is both human and divine. Usually he is depicted as sitting as in the Creed “He sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty”. Indeed. He rules sitting on his throne. But remember he is also our brother. So he stands. He stands with Stephen in his hour of need. He stands and will strengthen you Archana. He will stand and strengthen you and me also.

The Jewish leaders took Stephen outside and threw him into a pit and started to throw stones at him. This was the normal way the Jews executed people: throw that person into a pit and throw rocks until that person was dead. As Stephen was dying, he moaned the words which have been remembered for two thousand years: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” In such a prayer, Stephen was testifying of the divinity of Christ for no one can forgive sin except God alone. These were the same words that Jesus spoke from the cross when Jesus gave that powerful sermon from the cross and forgave his executors. Instead of hatred for his killers, Stephen was like Jesus and prayed for their forgiveness. Another rock was thrown and then another and soon Stephen’s body was silent and lifeless and Stephen became the first martyr of the church.

Christian martyrs believe passionately in Jesus Christ. These martyrs believe so deeply that they are willing to die for their faith in Christ and their consequent moral values. These martyrs don’t hide behind the safety of silence; they move from the safe “they” to the personal “you;” they speak God’s Word when and where it is not safe to speak the truth; and they are willing to die for the truth of Jesus Christ.

Martyrs inspire us. Martyrs encourage us. Martyrs lift us up so that we are more committed to Jesus Christ. You see, today is December 26th. But it could be December 27th or December 28th. All these dates in the middle of the Christmas season are the same. These dates are all about martyrs, those men and women through the centuries and today who believe in Jesus Christ, who do not remain silent but pay the price for speaking openly. These martyrs remind us that we can never separate the cradle for the cross. The wood of the cradle becomes transformed into the wood of the cross. Even in this festive Christmas season and the beginning of the Jesus Story, we cannot forget the end of the Jesus Story about the cross and crucifixion.

Amen.