

Homily of Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C, 2025

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 97:1-2, 6-7, 9; Revelation 22:22-14, 16-17, 20; John 17:20-26

The trial and the death of Jesus and the trial and death of Stephen have some resemblance. Jesus was falsely accused: “The chief priests and the whole Council tried to find some evidence against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they were unable to find any. Even though many came up to speak falsely against him, their evidence did not agree. At last, some stood up, and gave false witnesses... even so, their evidence did not agree” (Mark 14:55-59). Stephen was falsely accused: “Some men came forward... As they were unable to face the truth, they bribed some men to say, ‘We heard him speak against Moses and against God.’ So they stirred up the people, the elders and the teachers of the Law; they seized him... and brought him before the Council. Then they produced false witnesses against him” (Acts 6:8-15). The soldiers led Jesus outside the city, a place called Golgotha, which means the Skull, where he was crucified (Mark 15:20-22). Stephen was thrown out of the city and stoned to death. Jesus prayed on the Cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Stephen prayed while being stoned, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Jesus prayed as he died, “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Stephen prayed as he died, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Jesus and Stephen put before us the cost and rough path of discipleship. Whether false accusation, false witnessing, torture, cast out, and death, we are to pray for our detractors and forgive them. We are to commend ourselves into God’s hand. Like Stephen, we are to look up intently to heaven and see the glory of God and Jesus at the right hand of God. That is where our spiritual strength comes from. In Acts 7:54-55, while Stephen’s killers were enraged and ground their teeth at him, Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and fixed his eyes on heaven!

In John chapter 17, Jesus helps us to understand that Christians and non-Christians should live in unity and peace. Jesus prays, “Holy Father, I pray not only for them (Christians), but also those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may be one.” Jesus also says, “I have other sheep which are not of this fold. These I have to lead as well, and they listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock, since there is one shepherd” (John 10:16). “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:16). Therefore, whoever lives truthfully is among the other sheep who believe in Jesus through their words and actions. That is why the Catholic Church is deeply involved in inter-religious dialogue, in mutual understanding, and in peaceful co-existence. The Vatican II document. “Nostra Aetate”, is the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

Sadly, there is so much religious, economic, and political persecution in many parts of the world. We continue to pray for tolerance and acceptance among all peoples. However, it is easy to spend the whole of this homily talking about religious, economic, and political persecution around the world while overlooking the persecution within and around us. We persecute one another with oppositions, disagreements, unhealthy criticisms, rejections, false accusations, false witnessing, and so on. We are challenged to live out the spirit of “Nostra Aetate,” which is dialogue, mutual understanding, and peaceful co-existence wherever we are. The hymn, “They’ll Know We are Christians by Our Love” by Peter Scholtes, comes to mind:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
They'll know we are Christians by our love

We will work with each other, we will work side by side
We will work with each other, we will work side by side
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
They'll know we are Christians by our love.

In the second reading, Jesus declares, "Behold, ...I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. ... I am the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star. ... Let the one who thirsts come forward, and the one who wants it receive the gift of life-giving water" (Revelation 22:12-17). As Stephen "looked up intently to heaven," so also we, the weary, the brokenhearted, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the afflicted, the frightened, the needy, the helpless look to you, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star, in hopeful expectation of the fulfillment of your promises. Amen.

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