

Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; St. John 14:1-14

This sermon today is for the young people in Saint Stephen's Sunday School, but everyone is invited to listen. Today we have the story of our Patron Saint Stephen's martyrdom.

"Patron" means our church is named for Stephen, looks to his example, and is under the protection of his good wishes and prayers. Though Stephen lived 2,000 years ago, he lives now in the presence of JESUS – So Stephen's good wishes and prayers are right there in front of Jesus in heaven.

Stephen is the first martyr for Jesus. "Martyr" means "Witness." Stephen spoke up for Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. He and six other men were chosen by the Apostles to be the first Deacons in the church; to take care of the widows and the poor people in the congregation, to give the Apostles freedom to travel and spread the word about Jesus as the Son of God. While Stephen did this work, he Witnessed, he told about who Jesus was and what Jesus did. For that, the enemies of Jesus dragged Stephen into court before the High Priest of Jesus's and Stephen's own Jewish people. But Stephen wasn't afraid. In fact, he glowed and shined with the power of the Holy Spirit: people who looked at him during his trial said he had the face of an angel.

[This is all in the Bible, in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Acts shows how Jesus's disciples witnessed to Jesus as the Lord after Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.]

So Stephen gave a speech before the religious court of his own people the Jews. He traced their history from Abraham and Moses and the Red Sea and the Wandering in the Wilderness. He spoke of Joshua and entering the Promised Land. He spoke of King David and then of the prophets. He said that the people very often didn't listen to or obey God and that they sometimes killed God's messengers the prophets. And then he said they had just done this very

thing to God's Son Jesus. Since the court that Stephen stood before was the same court that had condemned Jesus and sent him to Pilate to be crucified, they were enraged. Without going any further, the people who had given testimony against Stephen forced him out of the court and stoned him.

As Stephen was being taken out of the court, he said he saw Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God. With that, they started throwing the stones. As Stephen was badly hurt and dying, he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And then he said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," and then died.

Notice three things:

1. Jesus standing at God's throne. Usually we speak of Jesus sitting, like a king, at the right hand of God. Here Jesus is **standing: He is standing up for Stephen as Stephen was standing up for Jesus.**
2. Stephen's words were very like Jesus's last words on the cross:
Jesus said, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit" and Stephen said, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit."
3. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" as he was being crucified, and Stephen said "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" as he was being stoned to death. They both forgave their killers.

There is another important thing in our reading from Acts today. There was a young man named **Saul** who held the cloaks of those false witnesses who stoned Stephen. Saul approved of their killing Stephen. That young man was the future Saint Paul the Apostle. Saul was his Jewish name; Paul was his Roman name. Jesus appeared to him as Saul was traveling from Jerusalem to persecute more Christians in the ancient city of Damascus in Syria. Saul fell to the ground as

Jesus said “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” JESUS STOOD UP FOR STEPHEN AND **IDENTIFIED** WITH HIM! Jesus changed Saul from an enemy to one of his greatest apostles, the Apostle Paul. Saint Paul spread the gospel all around the Roman Empire and wrote half of the books in the Christian New Testament.

Also, the Christians who fled Jerusalem after Stephen’s martyrdom (remember martyrdom means standing up for the truth even to the death), spread the gospel around wherever they went. A saying was born: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”!

Stephen was as influential for Jesus in his death or even more so, as he was in his life, just as the Lord Jesus was himself.

We have a great patron saint in Stephen. How about us? If we follow Stephen:

- We are good to the poor and the elderly and the sick, and while we do this work...
- We do it in Jesus’s name and are prepared to speak up for Jesus as our Lord.
- We let God the Holy Spirit fill us with grace and power to have courage and to be clear in our witness, and not afraid.
- We “speak the truth to power” when we have to. If we suffer or pay some price for doing this, we are prepared to forgive and not hold grudges against those who disagree and do not accept what we say – because we never know what will happen to them (Think of Saint Paul’s change after Stephen’s witness)
- Come what may, we trust in Jesus in all circumstances,
- Whether we live or die he will take care of us.

AMEN.