

First Christian Martyr.

Let us gather in God's presence – as we read these words from Isaiah 12:2

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation.”

Join with this opening prayer of praise, worship and confession;

Gracious God, you are with me in this place at this time, may my senses be alive to your presence with me. I bring my sight and my sense of smell, my hearing, my sense of taste and my touch. I bring my heart, my mind and my spirit and pray you open me to your presence here.

I remember and claim the promise of Jesus that where two or three gather in his name, he is there with them, and I believe that through the Holy Spirit, that promise is fulfilled for me now. My worship reminds me of who you are, the creator God, who made heaven and earth, who came to me, to all people in the person of Jesus, your son to reveal your mercy and love. Through earth and heaven one song shall ring, the Lord Omnipotent is King.

My worship reminds me too I am your child, forgiven, cared for, and given a purpose in you. As I think of your glory and power, it seems incredible that you could be bothered with all the stuff of my little life. Lord God, I sing of your greatness and majesty as I come to worship you for all that you are. Thank you be being the King of heaven and earth, the judge of all, the One who has created all that is out of nothing. Yet you are my Father, the One who holds the vastness of universes and galaxies and you tell me that you have my names written on the palm of your hands and you encourage me to come boldly before your throne of grace, to find mercy and grace to help me in my hour of need. Your word is right and true, you are faithful and just and righteous and the earth is full of your unfailing love.

So I come to confess my failures, my sin, my disobedience, my Luke warmness to you. I acknowledge my need of your grace and forgiveness – I have nothing in myself that could make me right with a holy and righteous God, nothing that I could do or bring that could ever make me good enough to come to you. I confess that I have not always served you as I should, I have not always been gracious to others, I have not always trusted and obeyed you. Many times I have heard that quiet voice urging me to do something and I have not listened, I have chosen not to obey because it is easier that way, because my own comfort is sometimes my greatest concern. I have cared more for myself than I have for others, for your world, for your honour and glory. I repent and thank you that because of Jesus, because of His death for me, I can find grace and forgiveness.

We thank you too that by your Holy Spirit you walk with me day by day, be with me now teaching, encouraging, rebuking, helping me in Jesus name I pray. Amen.

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The New Testament scripture readings are from **Acts 6:15 then Acts 7:54-8:1a**, in the NIV translation.

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

## ***The Stoning of Stephen***

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of their killing him.

### **Stephen – A Martyr for Jesus**

A wealthy Oriental man took his little daughter to a missionary school, willing to pay any expense. However he didn't want his daughter to enrol as a student, but merely to remain only long enough for the missionaries to put something on her face to make her as beautiful as the other girls at the school. The missionary in charge of the school explained that nothing was put on the girls' faces to make them pretty. "Then why are they better-looking than the other girls in our towns?" He asked. "When the girls come here they are just plain looking, but before long they become pretty. What do you put on their faces?"

The missionary replied, "It's not something we put on their faces, but Someone they receive into their hearts."

Last Sunday we reflected on Stephen, one of the early church's disciples who took his call to be a believer seriously and became one "sent out" to be an apostle of Christ Jesus. We learnt how Stephen was chosen to be a deacon and that he too was also an apologist, a defender of the teachings of Jesus and the Christian faith. Our reflection today remains with Stephen as we learn how his defence of the faith led to his becoming the first believer to be martyred in the Christian Church.

Stephen, if you recall, did not mention the charges made against him but rather he kept to the central issue, the view of Scripture versus the legalism. What is meant by this is that; the prophetic view of Scripture tries to get the truth out of Scripture, by saying, God has spoken, now how do we try to get the fullest and clearest possible meaning of what God says whilst the legalistic view tries to force Scripture into a mould and says, God has spoken, and this is the way our fathers understood God; therefore what God meant, we shall resist any attempt to make it mean anything else. Many sincere people follow in the tradition of legalism, by the resist allowing the Scripture to lead them into all truth; rather, they are trying to jam the truth into the little moulds.

Stephen undertook to meet the legalistic attitude by a long, involved argument, pointing out firstly that God's revelation to Israel was never bound to one place like the Temple, nor to one person like Moses. For in fact that the original covenant was made by God long before the time of Moses It was made with Abraham, when there was no Law and no Temple and Abraham could worship God

acceptably. This covenant was not made in the land of Canaan but was made in Mesopotamia. The Law was not given in Jerusalem; it was given in Sinai. God's activity therefore had not been limited to Palestine. God's redemptive activity was available to humanity, before there was a Law and before there was a Temple. Secondly, Stephen's defence repeated the resistance of Israel to God's revelation, a revelation has been progressive, continuing to increase as time pass by. So could it not continue to increase still more to the time of Jesus? If God's promise originally made to Abraham had included the blessing of the Gentiles, certainly it was not intended to stop with the Jewish people.

It was this understanding Stephen had of progressive revelation, his introducing of the other side, the human inertia that was the problem to the Pharisees and likes; not that people have moved ahead of the prophets but that people refused to move with the prophets who had announced the coming of the Righteous One, the Messiah of Israel, identified as Jesus. Thus Israel's disposition to disobey the divine revelation persisted till its awful culmination in the betrayal and murder of the Righteous One. Stephen boldly and directly accused his accusers of resisting the Holy Spirit and killing Jesus.

This was too much! The mention of the murder of Jesus was inflammatory. Stephen's sermon enraged the members of the Sanhedrin that they began gnashing their teeth at him and as they did so, filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen looked heavenward and seeing the glory of God, announced, "I see the heavens opened up and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." The Sanhedrin members we are told cried out with a loud voice, plugged their ears and attacked him. Stephen's defence is one of the great prophetic messages of the Early Church. It is a pioneer speech that moves out into unexplored territory of thought. But its immediate result was the death of Stephen.

However, we also read that when Stephen faced the Sanhedrin to defend the Gospel, all the members of the council "saw that his face was like the face of an angel". His face was only the reflection of what was in his heart and Stephen radiated the glory of Christ. For he was a truly an enthusiastic, energetic, effervescent man, full of wisdom, full of faith, full of God's grace and full of God's power.

Stephen was cast out of the city too be stoned for blasphemy in accordance to the Law, "Bring out of the camp him who cursed" (Leviticus 24:14) for "He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him" (Leviticus 24:16) beginning with the witnesses stoning him first, "The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people" (Deuteronomy 17:7). Not only was the Law specific on the matter, The Talmud says that after the witnesses have been heard, and sentence is pronounced, the condemned man "is led forth, while some one precedes him announcing: Such a one, son of so and so, is led forth to be stoned for such an offense. When they are about six feet from the place of execution, the condemned man is stripped, and "one of the witnesses casts a stone, and if this does not kill the man, then another, and then, if death has not ensued, the people take up the task" (Sanhedrin, 6).

In such a manner Stephen was stoned to death, and his death is the only one in the New Testament apart from Christ's, which is related with any degree of detail and in an unforgettable manner. Perhaps the reason such attention is given to the way Stephen died is the similarity to the way Jesus died.

- Both were accused by false witnesses of blasphemy.

- Both prayed for their persecutors.
- Both offered a prayer of commitment to the Lord – Stephen died uttering the words, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:59, 60; cf. Luke 23:46,34).
- Both were buried by sympathetic men.
- Both went to the father.

As a result of Stephen's death, members of the early church suffered a severe blow. How could God do this to them? They had lost their champion defender of the faith. Who would or could take his place? Before long, they discovered that God transformed tragedy into triumph and made the wrath of people to praise him. Stephen had emboldened others to stand up for Jesus. Those who buried Stephen did so at the risk of their own lives, for his persecutors would watch to see who claimed Stephen's body.

Yet Stephen's death affected one person we know of; for as those who had brought witness against Stephen were required to cast the first stones and to give themselves freedom of movement for forceful throwing they removed their outer garments and laid them at the feet of Saul, one of ringleader-Pharisees. Stephen's magnificent martyrdom kept goading Saul until he finally capitulated on the Damascus road. The great Augustine observed, "If Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have had Paul."

Stephen was the first in the list of deacons, first in the line of apologists and first in the long line of martyrs. So Stephen, whose name means "crown," received the crown of the martyr. Yet our language received another word, for the Greek word *martys* originally meant simply "witness," but because of the great crowd of witnesses who paid for their testimony with their blood, it has come to mean what our English word "martyr". How many untold myriads have since died for the faith? we may not become martyrs, but are we willing to be apostles for Jesus today and defend the faith?

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Join now with this prayer

Gracious Father, you gave the first martyr Stephen grace to pray for those who took up stones against him: grant that in all sufferings for the truth. I may learn to love even my enemies and to seek forgiveness for those who desire my hurt, looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for me and all humankind, Jesus Christ, my advocate, who is alive and reigns with you, Father and in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and always.

Centre me now, Lord Jesus, on your presence among your people in my community as I lift up my heart desire, my soul's deep needs, my hunger, fears and failures. Open me to your Spirit's urgings and awaken me to live faithfully as your child in a changing, often hurting world and enliven me to be and to do the gospel of Christ.

I pray for your church, Jesus Christ, here in our community, land and throughout the world, that we, who are your followers today might be obedient in our discipleship, joyful in our witness and patient in times of difficulty. May my live speak of the grace of God in such a way that others may hear and come to know friendship with God that I have found through you Jesus.

I pray for all who feel the weight of the responsibilities they carry, at home, at work or in the church. For those in positions of leadership, locally or nationally, especially in these days of this pandemic, that they may exercise influence for the good of others and not for selfish ends.

I bring to you, merciful God, my concerns for myself and for others and pray for those who find themselves caught between the need to let go and the desire to hold on. I pray for those who struggle with addiction, that you Lord, would give to them the strength and support they need to battle their addiction and to overcome it.

I pray for those around me who need your care and ask that you would make of me your instrument of healing, peace and redemption. I pray for those that are lonely that they might find a companion in you. I pray for those whose lives have become diminished because of illness, or age that they may be conscious of your life within them, a life which continues to deepen and strengthen, even in the face of human weakness. I pray for the bereaved that in their sorrow they might be aware of your presence sustaining them.

Reveal your presence with them and with me, God of life, that as people of renewed faith and vitality, we may be empowered to serve your world, and so give glory to you; for I offer my prayers and my life in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples and me to say;

Our Father Amen.

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Here is a **Hymn** from the New English Hymnal (1986) partly based on verses by Christopher Wordsworth (1807-1885) entitled "**Stephen, first of Christian martyrs**" and it can be sung to the tune "**Abbots Leigh**" found in Church Hymnary 4 at number 615

Stephen, first of Christian martyrs,  
let the church in hymns proclaim;  
following close the Saviour's passion,  
thus he won immortal fame:  
for his foes he prayed forgiveness  
while they stoned him unto death,  
to the Lord his soul commending  
as he yielded up his breath.

Holy Spirit, gift of Jesus,  
Shed thy light upon our eyes,  
that we may behold with Stephen  
that fair realm beyond the skies,  
where "the Son of Man in glory  
waits for us at God's right hand,  
king of saints and hope of martyrs,  
Lord of all the pilgrim band.

See him who went on before us  
Heavenly mansions to prepare,  
who for us is ever pleading  
by his wounds of glory there;



in that blessed home of splendour  
Christ our Saviour reigns above,  
calling us to share his rapture  
in the Father's boundless love.

### **A blessing**

If the God who raised Jesus from the dead is for us, who dare be against us? We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

Step out into the world in humble confidence: there is nothing about to happen that God has not foreseen, and no situation where Christ will not be there ahead of you, preparing a place and an opportunity for you. Thanks be to God.

The peace of God, which goes beyond all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ, God's Son. And the blessing of God all-loving, the Creator, Redeemer and Counsellor, will be with you now and always. Amen.