Jesu Juva

**Saint Stephen, Protomartyr**

Text: St. Matthew 23:34-39; Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is little more disappointing than a celebration long looked forward to, that does not quite work out the way one imagined it would; the celebration of Christmas is no different. Perhaps, because it is Christmas, and our expectations are so high, our disappointments seem even more intense.

Our celebrations of Christmas are often full of disappointments: the turkey was dry, the dress did not fit, somebody was missing because of divorce, death, sickness, stubbornness, or old grudges; the gifts we received were not what we had hoped for, or those to whom we gave gifts accidentally gave away their disappointment in the gift they received because it was not what they had hoped for.

We know our Christmas celebrations should not be this way, but no matter how hard we try, we can never make our Christmas celebrations absolutely perfect. Our celebration cannot live up to Hollywood, Hallmark, or Martha Stewart ideals of the perfect Christmas. The harder we try, the more disappointed and depressed we get. But then, perhaps our Christmas celebration has the wrong focus.

After a full week of worship, those few pilgrims who come to worship this day might be tempted to think that the Church Herself has given in to that same depressing spirit. She has not. Still, I imagine some of you may be wondering why it is that we are observing a martyr’s day on the day following Christmas. Just when family and friends have been coming together around the celebration of Christ’s birth, it seems rather curious, perhaps even a bit odd, that the faithful should dwell upon death.

After all, here we are, the songs of the angels still ringing out in the heavens and our hearts, and suddenly, we are thrust into a scene of murderous violence. It just does not seem right that we should, so soon after such joy, see such sin in all its ugliness. Somehow today does not seem to fit very well with the Gospel message of peace on earth, goodwill to men. Yet, the Church, in defiance of all cultural expectations for keeping Christmas merry, directs her children to mark a gruesome death the day after we celebrate our Lord Jesus’ birth.

You should not be surprised at this, for the fundamental fact of the Christmas Gospel is that our Savior was born among us sinners to die for our sins. So, we observe the martyrdom of Saint Stephen today, lest anyone is confused concerning the real reason for the season.

What do I mean? Ponder this.

For what reason was the last gift of the Magi myrrh? Myrrh is an embalming ointment for burial. Neither is it a meaningless detail that the Blessed Virgin Mother of our Lord would bind her newborn Son with strips of cloth when she laid Him in the manger. These strips of cloth very much resemble the strips of cloth that bound Jesus in death as He laid in His tomb. The salvific message of the Gospel is that this Infant was born to die that we might live.

Do you see the irony? Jesus’ death is the joy of Christmas! Jesus’ death is precisely what Christmas is all about. Any spirit of Christmas that suggests we find our joy somewhere or in something other than the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is another spirit from some other source than the Triune God.

The odd thing about the account of St. Stephen is that he shows himself most filled with joy and the Holy Spirit as he stands upon the brink of his vicious death. Our reading said that Stephen’s face had the appearance of the face of an angel. How odd it seems of God, to teach us that our great joy, the joy of Christmas, lies in death—yet, not just any death, but in Jesus’ death for us, and in our death when we depart to be with Christ. This is a far, far better thing than this life under the power and curse of sin. Death means the final destruction of our old Adam as we wait in the hope of the resurrection of our bodies and life everlasting.

The Apostle Paul, in his former life as Saul the Pharisee, willfully participated in the stoning of Stephen.  After his conversion to the faith, the repentant Paul realized what genuine blessing Stephen had enjoyed in, with, and through his cruel martyrdom.  Paul would go on to write how he, too, longed to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. St. Paul desired to become like Christ in His death so that He might be perfectly conformed to the image of God’s Son.  *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”* This is the confession of Paul, for whom to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Now all this talk about *“joy in death”* probably sounds more than a little strange and morbid to you; it certainly does not appeal to my own comfort-loving flesh.  To understand why the Apostle Paul teaches us that our death in Christ is something devoutly to be wished for, we must recall all that he witnessed in the martyrdom of Stephen and would later fully understand after his own conversion.

Paul looked at Stephen, who was standing before the whole hostile council of the Jews under the accusation of blasphemy, and saw that Stephen’s face was like the face of an angel.  Stephen’s face was like the face of an angel because Stephen was looking unto Jesus, the author, and finisher of our faith, who had endured the Cross and had been raised to the right hand of God the Father.  Stephen’s face reflected the One whom Stephen beheld and confessed, the Son of Man, the Son of God.  Jesus, Himself had said that those deemed worthy to attain to the age to come would be sons of God and the equals of angels. So, when on the verge of his departure from this life, St. Stephen’s divine destiny in Christ became manifest in his angelic face.

You see, ultimately, we reflect that which we fix upon in the gaze of our hearts.  We show forth in our lives that which we love and trust in above all things, that which we look to before anything else.  Sad to say, very often that which we are beholding and attending to and looking at is not our Lord Jesus Christ.  No, it is almost always oneself that one is, in some way, looking at, attending to, and incessantly beholding, as though one is a spiritual Narcissus.  Our fallen nature, the *“Old Adam,”* in which dwells no good thing, is sin-tainted humanity completely turned in upon itself.

We must confess that fundamentally, we are obsessed with ourselves, with our own likes and dislikes, with our opinions, with our own sinful desires.  The most blatant expression of our self-orientation is the ungodly pride we hold in our hearts concerning our own attributes or our own accomplishments.  Thus, our physical strength or beauty, our mental capacity or agility, our professional or financial position, the esteem we enjoy among people, the quality of our family or friends, and a multitude of other temporal things are, all too often, what we look to for security, as if these passing shadows were worthy of our ultimate concern!

I must ask you. Which of these things do we have that we did not first receive from our gracious God, quite apart from any merit or worthiness in us?  And why do we attend to these gifts of God as if they were of our own making and somehow constitute who and what we are?

On the other hand, our obsessive self-regard may focus on the complete opposite, upon our lackings, our failures, and our sins.  This is nothing less than the flip side of the same coin, and therefore, the same old idolatry.  For we still remain much more concerned with ourselves than with God—our focus is still inward. Now, instead of our focus being on all we love about ourselves, it is simply focused on what we deem missing in ourselves, what is wrong with us, rather than on what we have convinced ourselves we have right.

Do you not see that all your navel-gazing, all your self-evaluation, whether with joyous rapture or with sorrowful sadness, is nothing but vanity and pride?  The Old Adam in us is absolutely fascinated by our self-defined beauty or foulness of body and soul.  We are completely taken with admiration or despair over our words or our works.

But through St. Stephen God calls us today to turn away from ourselves and to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author, and finisher of our faith. In His great love, He has brought us to faith through the Word of the Gospel.  With His great love, He has done everything necessary to save us. As He said from His cross, *“It is finished.”*

The words that Stephen spoke reflect Jesus’ words as He died, *“Father, forgive them, for they do know not what they do.”* Those who look to Christ in faith, God forgives, no longer holding their sins against them.  In this, we poor sinners are given to behold the glorious face of God Himself in our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. We are given to reflect what we behold by faith, even as the barren moon reflects the light of the blazing sun. We become brilliant with righteousness and glory that is not our own, righteousness and glory that is ours only by virtue of our union in Christ, the Righteous One.

By the working of the Holy Spirit, we, like St. Stephen, look to Jesus.  For the joy set before Him at the prospect of our salvation, Jesus endured the Cross and despised its shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God interceding for us before our Father in Heaven and speaking on our behalf.  When we hear in faith Christ’s Word of Absolution, we look to Jesus.  When we come in faith to receive Christ’s Body and Blood for our forgiveness, we look to Jesus.  When we attend to Christ’s Word as it is preached, taught, and read, when we attend to Christ’s Word as it sung in the hymns and prayed in the liturgy, we fix our eyes on Jesus.

As we do that, the Bible teaches that we are being transfigured into the likeness of Christ.  St. Paul writes in Second Corinthians, *“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.”* Even though our mortal bodies are, even now, in the process of dissolution and death, the new nature created in Christ Jesus within us, is welling up and being renewed by the Word of Christ’s Gospel.  It is written in First John, *“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”*

Beholding Christ makes us like Him. On the Last Day, our transfiguration will be brought to its fulfillment, and we shall perfectly reflect and share in Christ's resurrection majesty. In fact, the first chapter of Second Peter, states that through our Lord Jesus Christ and His precious promises, we actually become partakers of God’s divine nature. This brings us right back to Christmas. God the Son became one with man to make man one with God.

Therefore, let us turn away from our obsession with ourselves and earthly things.  Let us lift up our eyes so that we gaze upon Christ alone and the high calling we have in Him.  For Christ is our new and true self, to whom we are joined through His holy birth and His innocent suffering and death on our behalf, and by our Baptism, into His Body.  Only when we relinquish ourselves in faith to Christ do we become what we were created by God to be, little icons, little images of Jesus, who is the Great Icon of God the Father.

May God enable us, just as He enabled St. Stephen, to look heavenward and long for Christ’s coming and the time when we will hear Him say, *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Rev. Raymond D. Parent II

Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church

Crestview, Florida

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