

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Our sermon text today is written in Acts 7:55-60 and 1 Peter 2:2-10

Let us pray ...

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight; we pray through Your son, Jesus Christ.

This morning in the reading from the Book of Acts we heard the account of Stephen's death. In this reading St. Luke records an image of total injustice and violence which is also an image of pure comfort.

Let me set the scene for you. This morning we heard of a man named Stephen, *who was a man full of God's grace and power and did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people* (Acts 6:8). At some stage, members of the local synagogue began to argue with him, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Therefore, they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the Law. They seized him and brought him before the Sanhedrin and produced false witnesses against him (6:8-13).

As Stephen is questioned by the high priest, he begins to preach the Word of God to them, and their reaction was no different than their forefathers before them. *When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him – 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* (7:54, 57-58).

So where is the comfort in this violent and murderous scene, you might ask?

As they were stoning him, *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."*

Listen again, *Stephen ... looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*

Stephen, as he was about to die, was given a vision of the heavenly throne room. In the Apostle's Creed we confess that Jesus sits at the right hand of God, and from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. But here in this vision, Jesus is standing at the right hand of God.

In this vision Jesus is not in a place of judgment. Rather, as Stephen is making his bold confession before men, Christ is interceding on his behalf before our heavenly Father. As Stephen stands alone and is falsely condemned before an earthly court, Jesus acts as his advocate in the heavenly court, and here we are given an insight into the work that Christ does on our behalf as our intercessor and advocate.

The second reading for this morning helps us to see why he does this. As we heard St. Peter reminds his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who they truly are.

In his letter to the Christians, St. Peter compares Christians to “living stones” and a “holy priesthood.” Both of these images are based on things that were realities in the Old Testament for the people of Israel. The “Living stones” has to do with the temple, that great building in Jerusalem where the people worshiped, and a “holy priesthood” has to do with the priests who carried out their duties there.

But these are not just some quaint figures of speech that are stuck in the past. These images also tell us about the living realities for us today, both individually as Christians and collectively as a church.

“Living stones and a holy priesthood.” The reading brings both of these ideas together: “*As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (2:4-5).

St. Peter reminds us that we are “Living stones”, and that this reality starts with the One true living stone, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He is the One living stone in whom and through whom we become living stones. Jesus the risen Christ is himself living, and he gives us life. He is the chief cornerstone, and we are connected to him, we are all stones fitted and joined together, “*being built up as a spiritual house.*”

It all starts with Jesus. He is the chief cornerstone of this spiritual house, this was prophesied in Scripture. The prophet Isaiah says: “*Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.*” God’s plan all along was to send His Christ to Israel, His own Son, precious in his sight. Think of what the Father said at Jesus’ baptism: “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*”

And yet this heaven-sent Christ was rejected by the very leaders of Israel. And this too was prophesied in Scripture. Psalm 118 says: “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*” And Isaiah says that the Christ will be “*a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence.*”

The scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests and elders of Israel, all religious leaders of Israel, all those who should have known better, rejected Jesus. He was a stumbling block for them. He was offensive to them. He exposed their hypocrisy. He threatened their status and prestige, and they had to get rid of this troublemaker who was disturbing their status quo. Which, as we know, is what they did. That is what we remembered and celebrated at Easter. They plotted together and set their trap. The betrayal, His arrest and trials in the night. His being sent over to the Roman governor, the stirred-up mob, and his crucifixion.

Despite of their evil intent, it was actually God’s plan that was at work. For it was through this unjust suffering and death of the Messiah that God was carrying out his own justice on

our behalf. Jesus, the sinless one, died the death of a sinner in our place. He shed his holy precious blood on the cross to pay the price for our forgiveness. His life given up in place of ours, to appease the wrath of God and remove the debt of sin.

St. Peter continues, moving from the building that is the temple to the priests who carry out their duties at the temple: *“You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”*

“A holy priesthood,” that too is who we are. You are part of the priesthood of all believers, and you were drafted into this priesthood at your baptism. In baptism God put his name on you. There you were made holy, you were set apart to belong to God, you were set apart for his service. That’s what priests are, that’s what priests do. The Old Testament priests were consecrated, set apart, holy to the Lord, and dedicated to his service.

In fact, the whole people of Israel were set apart to be God’s holy priesthood in the world. In Exodus 19, after the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai, He told Israel: *“You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples . . . and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

We are God’s treasured possession, a chosen people, a holy priesthood. Notice, this is the very same language that St. Peter uses and applies to us now as the church, he says *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”*

Yes, we are a holy priesthood, a royal priesthood, dedicated to the service of our king, Jesus Christ. And what do priests do? They offer up sacrifices. However, the sacrifices we offer are not sacrifices for the atonement of sin. No, that once-and-for-all sacrifice has already been offered up by our great High Priest. Jesus sacrifice on the cross is the only sacrifice that atones for sin, and that sacrifice has been done.

And because of Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin, now through him you and I offer up our sacrifices in service to the Lord. As St. Peter says, we *“offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* And what are these sacrifices? These are our prayers and praises and thanksgivings to God. These sacrifices occur as we proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. When we sing our hymns, when we pray for the people of this world, when we confess the faith to one another and bear witness to the world, we are offering up spiritual sacrifices as the holy priesthood.

Therefore folks, embrace your identity as the people of God. Confess your faith boldly, even in the face of punishment and death. Because you are living stones, a holy priesthood, set apart to belong to God and dedicated to his service; knowing that you have been made acceptable to God the Father through our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen**