

## **THE STORY OF STEPHEN**

The first lesson for Sunday May 7, is the story of Stephen as told by Luke in the book of Acts (**Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60**). As you can see this is an unusual lectionary, as it covers parts of two chapters with a lot of verses omitted in the middle. Let's try to piece together the whole story. In Chapter 6 we are introduced to Stephen and other "deacons" in the early Christian church. The early Christian church was expanding rapidly. The disciples were struggling to keep up with the tasks of spreading the Gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem and beyond. Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah had two factions—the Hebrews (Jews native to Jerusalem) and the Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews who had settled in Jerusalem). There was dispute between the Hellenists and the Hebrews, complaining about inequitable care for the widows among the Hellenists. The disciples and other leaders among the Hebrews decided to appoint seven men of good standing to tend to these issues (distribution of food and other needs to widows) so that the twelve would not "neglect the word in order to wait on tables". Hence the appointing of the first 7 deacons (care givers, ministers of the church's temporal needs) of the Christian church.

Acts Chapters 6 & 7 tell the story of Stephen, beginning with his selection as one of the Seven, continuing into his public ministry as a man "full of grace and power" who does "great wonders and signs among the people," recounting his fiery long sermon (longer than any sermon by Peter, Paul or, even Jesus) remonstrating the Jews on their infidelity throughout the ages; describing his trial, exile and stoning at the hands of a mob and the Sanhedrin; and finally telling of his death and visions of heavenly glory.

Stephen's life and death repeatedly chime with Jesus' own. Israel's leaders are bent on destroying a visionary full of the Holy Spirit who has offered great wonders and gracious signs among the people. On the verge of both men's deaths, the Son of man is present at God's right hand. . Both men are abusively apprehended by a loud mob, stripped of their garments and killed before witnesses while praying for their executioners' forgiveness. A bit-player on the scene—Saul of Tarsus—who stood by as Stephen was stoned, will emerge center-stage, to persecute the Church, and eventually to be persecuted for it. We will know him as the Apostle Paul.

All this is essential set-up to the actual martyrdom of Stephen. Here, too, the way of Jesus shows through Stephen's words and deeds. Again, the spectators act out echoes of the Passion narrative. But the phrases that demand attention are when Stephen speaks as Jesus has spoken. Having seen the heavens opened and knowing that the Son of Man will judge his innocence, Stephen forgives his tormentors: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). And in trust, he commends his spirit to the risen Jesus (7:59). His ultimate message is the announcement of new beginnings, even for those who would rob him of his life. Stephen is able to love so recklessly because he has entrusted himself to Jesus.

So, ultimately this is not just a story of the first Christian martyr who was violently killed because of his belief in Christ. Stephen models trust in Jesus and forgiveness, even as he is being martyred. Like Stephen, God's people might die for their faith. However, Luke in his writings in Acts challenges us to trust the risen Christ and to bear witness to the truth of his resurrection and exaltation, even if it means death.

***CHRIST IS RISEN, ALLELUIA***