

Saint Paul's Parish, Kent  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, 20 April 2008  
The Reverend Allen LaMontagne

Acts 7.55-60  
Psalm 31.1-5,15-16  
1Peter 2.2-10  
John 14.1-14

*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these.*

Stephen is one who believes in God and does the works Jesus does and more. In the first lesson today, we have the tail end of the story of Stephen's martyrdom. Beginning with the sixth chapter of the Book of Acts, there is this... "And Stephen, full of grace and power did great wonders and signs among the people. But some who belonged to the synagogue arose and disputed with Stephen.... Then they secretly instigated some men, and stirred up the people...and they seized him and brought him before the council." (paraphrased Chapter 6.8-7.1)

Standing accused before the people, Stephen then delivers what amounts to a fifty-three verse sermon, an inspired truth-telling about the people's ways and errors in contrast to God's ways and truth and life; which brings us to verse 54... "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him." The lesson ends with Stephen interceding on behalf of those who murder him on the edge of town. With echoes of Jesus' own plea from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do..." Stephen cries with a loud voice: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these.*

In our Christian family history, many believers die as martyrs, giving their lives as a sacrifice that becomes a tipping point for others to live and act differently. It is martyrdom that serves as the midwife when the church is born and begins to thrive and grow. In what ways do the martyrs know Christ that allows them to die in faith, even forgiving those who brutally take their lives? For one thing, this mystery of faith has to do with the way

fear works in our lives. Jesus is known to introduce his words, saying, "Do not be afraid." Nevertheless, Jesus, Stephen, and the messages they proclaim become a threat to some and the impetus for violent reaction. Things may not be so good, but it is familiar hardship. What is unknown is a fearsome prospect. What is it about Stephen that so roils those who hear him? His detractors say: "We have heard him say this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us." There's the rub. Things known, be they good, bad or indifferent, must be maintained. "New" is a risk. Fear is the antithesis of hope. When it appears that Jesus and the Stephens like him may change things--even if to improve them--fear sets in and anger with it. Death follows.

After Stephen's death things do change--drastically. Ironically, what happens really has nothing to do with Stephen or the Gospel. Quite the contrary, actually. In Jerusalem about 67 A.D., a group known as the Zealots, who all along have wanted a Messiah warrior-king, mount an insurrection against the Romans. The danger then becomes not the "new" Gospel of mercy people were worried about, but overt, preemptive acts of violence perpetrated by religious extremists. In turn, the full force of imperial power comes down on Jerusalem, the temple being the central target of destruction. Those who live by the sword die by the sword, and the Jewish people are forced to scatter around the world having been driven from their homeland; thus, the significance of the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1947. Jews return to land God gives to Abraham and Abraham's seed.

Fear is a powerful thing. We all know it. It can be a good thing, alerting us to danger. But it's not always good. It can rob us of peace and joy. We all know fear, and as Christians, we also know Christ. To mature in relationship with Christ changes our experience of fear. Rather than being paralyzed or over-reactive, fear becomes *reverent fear*, that which mobilizes the believer to become less concerned about self and more concerned about not disappointing the One who has done so much for us. We fear being too little like Him who dies for you and me and all people. Reverent fear motivates us to live differently than we do when we are consumed with worry about ourselves.

This spiritual formation comes with the territory of ministry. In the spirit of Christ and Stephen, we are agents of change whether we like it or not. I really don't like the boat rocked. But I've learned that coming to a church,

into a community where exist deep customs and ingrained ways, that *is* change--without even trying. Just enter the system and change occurs, like a stone dropped in a pond, ripples move outward until sometimes they rebound at the edges and come back again over the source of change and the waters are roiled. This is very much the effect of the Gospel, the way, the truth, and the life of God in the world. It's not just Stephen, or Paul, or Martin Luther King; it is the Holy Spirit through the person of Christ sent by God the Father who sets out *not merely to change us as to prevent us from being further changed by the evil forces that already blind us to the love and care of God.*

We need to understand better how the world--people--have been changing for a long time, and not always for the better. God sends Jesus to return us to sanity, to heal us, to make us whole again. Rather than thinking how radical the Gospel is, rather than worrying about what God may call us to do differently than is the case now, *we need to consider how radically altered things already are from the way, the truth, and the life God intends all people to follow, to believe, and to enjoy.*

I got a call yesterday from a diocesan colleague to talk about Camp Wright, but the conversation soon moved to other areas, and the next thing I know Bonnie is giving me a history of the Diocese of Easton. She says in the time I've been here I can't really appreciate what a contentious diocese Easton was before, how hurting it was when Bishop Shand took the reins and with him came a ministry of healing that flourishes today by the grace of God. Once again I am reminded of the power of God in the world--in you and me and Episcopalians of every stripe; and not just Episcopalians, but Jews and people of Muslim faith, in religious quarters but not just there. Whenever we let go of fearfulness and live God's ways, dying to self and living mercifully, purposefully, joyfully with Christ who died for us and all people, we join Christ "to make the wounded whole...to heal the sinsick soul." There is a Balm in Gilead, Christ the Savior, and in him and through him he is using even us to bring healing to the world.

You know these words...*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.... Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these."* Can we be more fully this kind of people? I believe we can. There is only one way this courageous faith emerges in human nature, and that is in response to God's love. Only God's love can change our fear to awe and

plant in our hearts the greater desire to please Christ who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Draw near Christ in faith. As the love of God through him becomes more real to us, we begin to respond to him in love and ask God, *what would you have me do with my life? What way, what purpose, is there for me to please you more?* In this asking, we become a Stephen who prays, "Lord, Jesus, receive my Spirit." In this surrendering prayer, there us fresh beginning of new life, new hope, renewed faith and purpose forged in burning Gospel truth that God so loves the world that he gives his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Ask God about your life today, your purpose, step out in faith. Do what you can with grace, and expect God to help; and and be blessed forever, in the name of God...