

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
ST. STEPHEN, DEACON AND FIRST MARTYR
(Christmas I, A.D. 2010)

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventeenth Verse of the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Second Book of the Chronicles.ⁱⁱ

“... Now after the death of Jehoiada [**jeh-HOY-ah-dah**] came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them. And they left the house of the LORD God of their fathers, and served groves and idols: and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass. Yet he sent prophets to them, to bring them again unto the LORD; and they testified against them: but they would not give ear. And the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah [**zeck-are-EYE-uh**] the son of Jehoiada [**jeh-HOY-ah-dah**] the priest, which stood above the people, and said unto them, Thus saith [**SETH**] God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the LORD, that ye cannot prosper? because ye have forsaken the LORD, he hath also forsaken you. And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the LORD. Thus Joash [**JOE-ash**] the king remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada [**jeh-HOY-ah-dah**] his father had done to him, but slew his son. And when he died, he said, The LORD look upon it, and require it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

“And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus [**PROCK-orr-uss**], and Nicanor [**nick-EH-nor**], and Timon [**TYE-mun**], and Parmenas [**PARR-men-uss**], and Nicolas [**NICK-oh-lass**] a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

“Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians [**sigh-REE-knee-anz**], and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia [**sill-ISH-uh**] and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and brought him before the council, and set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law....’^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Today, we remember St. Stephen both as one of the original Deacons of the Church and as its first Martyr. The appointment of the

first seven Deacons, of whom Stephen was one, is recounted in today's Second Lesson, but that Lesson ends with his arraignment before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem.

As we have it appointed for Morning Prayer today, it does not even include the account of Stephen's trial, or of his great testimony before the Council^v – which was a major sermon, worthy of being compared to St. Peter's great sermon on the day of Pentecost.^{vi}

It is interesting to compare and contrast the effects of those two sermons. While St. Peter's Pentecost sermon converted about three thousand of its hearers,^{vii} we are not told the number who were affected by St. Stephen's final words. We do know from other events, however, that those words planted a seed in at least one heart, that of the instigator of Stephen's judicial murder, the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus,^{viii} and we know that later that seed not only sprouted but bore great fruit for the Lord, adding not only thousands of individuals to the Body of Christ but many entire congregations, amounting to several Provinces of the Church.

Nor, surprisingly, does today's Second Lesson continue long enough to give the account of Stephen's actual death,^{ix} although one would think that would be a natural part of the memorial service for a martyr, particularly the very first martyr of the Church, and most particularly where we have, in the highly authoritative form of canonical Scripture, a very circumstantial account of that death?

Clearly, the redactors of our Table of Lessons felt that by the time we read of St. Stephen's arraignment prior to trial, the most essential portions of his history have already been related, so that the passage read during our worship service does not need to continue farther in order to be complete.

But how can those editors have felt that the most important aspects of St. Stephen's story are complete even though they omit his magnificent – and very efficacious – sermon and his incredibly charitable act^x in emulating his Lord and Savior^{xi} by praying that God would forgive his murderers?

If you were selecting the passages to be read today, in honor of St. Stephen, wouldn't you choose more of Chapter 7 of Acts, to include his wonderful testimony of the Christian Faith, his courageous death, and his graceful forgiving of his persecutors? I am sure you would, for I certainly would have done so.

So why did the redactors of our Lectionary omit these very important elements? What, to them, seemed even more important, what did they wish to highlight for our instruction on this day?

I cannot answer that question with certainty, but I wonder if the answer may not lie in the Eleventh Commandment and in one of the Old Testament accounts that would have been familiar to every one of St. Luke's Jewish readers. That is the Commandment that we conventionally translate as "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor",^{xii} although as Deuteronomy makes clear,^{xiii} this might also be rendered, "In any judicial proceeding, you shall not commit perjury against your neighbor."^{xiv}

The ancient Jews had a particular horror of perjury because of the way that a witness's oath works. When one swears to tell the truth, one is either explicitly or implicitly calling God to witness to the truth of what one says. Today we are used to the shortened form, "So help me God", which is clear enough, but to understand this more fully, just think of the older and rather theatrical declaration, "May God strike me dead if I am not telling the truth!" This appeal for divine sanction for what one is saying is always at least implicit in every judicial oath.

Thus, taking a judicial oath always calls on God to be a party to the transaction. So if such a sworn witness is actually perjuring himself, he is *using* God to help put his fraud over on the tribunal and parties before whom he is testifying. He is actually making God an involuntary partner in his crime, which is a most serious sacrilege. *This* is why the Jews had such a particular hatred for perjury.

The depth of their loathing for this religious crime is illustrated by one story they preserved and the way the odium attached to the principal malefactors in that story has lasted down to our own day. In the First Book of the Kings,^{xv} we are told how the evil King Ahab coveted a

vineyard in Jezreel belonging to his neighbor, Naboth [**NEH-botth**]. However, Naboth [**NEH-botth**] refused to sell that land to Ahab because it was part of the patrimony^{xvi} his family had received by divine appointment in the division of the Promised Land among the Israelites.^{xvii}

Therefore Ahab's even more evil Queen, the Phoenician princess Jezebel, arranged to steal Naboth's [**NEH-botthz**] land by having him judicially murdered. She hired straw men to perjure themselves by testifying that Naboth [**NEH-botth**] had committed blasphemy, for which presumed crime he was stoned to death. Then Ahab simply took over the dead Naboth's [**NEH-botthz**] property.

This act so affronted God that He sent to Ahab His prophet Elijah, who pronounced God's judgement upon Ahab and Jezebel: their crime was so heinous that they would not be permitted to lie in the soil of Israel that they had coveted and defiled. Instead, their corpses would be eaten by carrion birds or by dogs.

Ahab repented of his wife's evil deed and of his own profiting from it, so the Lord had mercy on him and, when he had been killed in battle, permitted him to be buried. However, the prophecy as to him was fulfilled in part because dogs did indeed lick up the blood he shed from his fatal wounds.^{xviii} Jezebel, on the other hand, as the principal in the crime against Naboth [**NEH-botth**], died precisely as Elijah had foretold and her corpse was, indeed, eaten by dogs.^{xix}

So let us consider how all this Old Testament history relates to the account of Stephen's martyrdom. I suggest to you that if you compare the stories of Naboth [**NEH-botth**] and Stephen, you will see remarkable similarities between the two. Both were judicially murdered, both were murdered at the behest of those who were jealous of them and who coveted what they had accomplished, both were murdered by means of false charges of blasphemy, and both were murdered through the employment of perjury.

Conclusion:

What, then, can the editors of our Lectionary have meant by ending our Second Lesson with Stephen's arraignment? What of importance had already happened at that point? I suggest to you that the one thing of greatest importance that was completed by that point in the story was the perjury of the suborned witnesses.^{xx}

Then is it too much to suppose that our editors wished to underline that perjury, and the perjurers' sacrilege, by the obvious parallels to the story of Jezebel, Ahab, and Naboth [**NEH-botth**], and indeed, parallels to Joash's [**JOE-ashez**] murder of the prophet Zechariah [**zeck-are-EYE-uh**], parallels which all the Jews would have recognized? Is it too much to suppose that the editors were thereby suggesting that the very soil of Jerusalem, and of Palestine, would reject St. Stephen's persecutors?

For if the very earth rebels against against the enemies of Stephen, it is also witnessing in favor of St. Stephen and the Faith for which he died.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister^{xxi}
December 26, 2010.

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *II Chronicles 24: 17-22 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Acts 6: 1-15 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Acts 6: 12-13 (RSV).*

^v *Acts 7: 2-53.*

^{vi} *Acts 2: 14-40.*

^{vii} *Acts 2: 41.*

^{viii} *Acts 7: 58; Acts 8: 1; Acts 9: 4-5.*

^{ix} *Acts 7: 58-60.*

^x *Acts 7: 60.*

^{xi} *St. Luke 23: 34.*

^{xii} *Exodus 20: 16 (KJV); see, e.g., The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 228 (South Africa 1954).*

^{xiii} *Deuteronomy 19: 15-21.*

^{xiv} Cf. HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, EDS., *THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA Revised Standard Version* 93 fn. (Oxford University Press 1977).

^{xv} *I Kings* 21: 8-24.

^{xvi} *I Kings* 21: 3-4.

^{xvii} See, e.g., *Leviticus* 25: 10; *Leviticus* 25: 13-17; *Leviticus* 25: 23-24; *Leviticus* 25: 34.

^{xviii} *I Kings* 21: 27-29; *I Kings* 22: 37-38.

^{xix} *II Kings* 9: 30-37.

^{xx} *Acts* 6: 12-14.

^{xxi} Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.