

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr (December 26)²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.⁴

“... But though the righteous be prevented with death, yet shall he be in rest. For honourable age is not that which standeth in length of time, nor that is measured by number of years. But wisdom is the gray hair unto men, and an unspotted life is old age. He pleased God, and was beloved of him: so that living among sinners he was translated. Yea speedily was he taken away, lest that wickedness should alter his understanding, or deceit beguile his soul. For the bewitching of naughtiness doth obscure things that are honest; and the wandering of concupiscence doth undermine the simple mind. He, being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time: For his soul pleased the Lord: therefore hastened he to take him away from among the wicked. This the people saw, and understood it not, neither laid they up this in their minds, That his grace and mercy is with his saints, and that he hath respect unto his chosen.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-ninth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.⁵

“... And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

“And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation

So we do not criticize the holy prophet, Zechariah, of the Old Testament. Instead, we see that Saint Stephen had even more grace, for he could look back to God the Son, in His human nature, forgiving the very men who were murdering Him, who were enjoying the spectacle of His suffering, as they displayed the depths of *Schadenfreude*⁸ [**SHAH-denn-froy-duh**]. Saint Stephen could recall God in the flesh forgiving genuine pains that were inflicted upon His Person.

May our Lord Jesus, grant to us the joy that comes when we are free to love everyone, including those who have wronged us, with that charity placed within us by the Holy Ghost that that can, if we acquire it, make us perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect. Amen

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The Rev'd Robert Hart⁹
December 26, 2011

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on the Feast of St. Stephen, 2011.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ *Wisdom* 4:7-15 (KJV).

⁵ Acts 7:59—8:8 (KJV).

⁶ II Chron. 24:20-22 (KJV).

⁷ Acts 7:57-60 (KJV).

⁸ The German word meaning for “joy taken in [others’] injuries”.

⁹ Rector, St. Benedict’s Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.

over him. As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in that city.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

In the Old Testament Chronicles, a prophet named Zechariah (not to be confused with the later prophet of the same name), suffered this fate:

“And the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada [dgeh-HOY-uh-duh] 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 [dgeh-HOY-uh-duh] his father had done to him, but slew his son. And when he died, he said, The LORD look upon it, and require it.”⁶

However, in the Book of Acts, we read of the same fate being suffered centuries later by the first Christian Martyr, Saint Stephen. Notice the difference.

“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed [SHOWD] before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”⁷

Saint Stephen had an advantage that Zechariah, centuries before, did not have. We do not criticize Zechariah for demanding justice when he died, because, unlike Saint Stephen, he could not look back to Jesus Christ on the Cross.

We all know the words from the Gospel of Luke, words spoken by Jesus as He was hanging upon the Cross: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” The Word made Flesh, God the Son in His human nature, showed us what mercy truly is. We already knew that God, from heaven, forgives sins. God cannot be harmed, wronged or deprived of anything.

Yet, as a Man, it is God who was mocked, beaten and crucified by sinful men, and who pronounced forgiveness. No angel can preach on this subject as well as you and I can, for it takes human frailty to speak of forgiving those who can cause us to suffer.