

## **The 5th Sunday of Easter & The Stoning of Stephen**

What Are we Christians supposed to feel about the world in which we live?

When we are confronted by the prospect of suffering, pain or even death, how should we respond?

Our readings today encourage us to not only ponder these questions, but moreover, they remind us that the world is not our home. It is our workplace, the place where we hone our spiritual skills, it is our practice ground, but it is not the stadium where the main event will be played; it is not our final destination of rest.

In our reading from Acts today, we heard of St Stephen's martyrdom. Stephen dies as though death is irrelevant, with his eyes firmly fixed on the heavenly vision.

In our Gospel reading we heard Jesus offering his followers a description, a vision of the Father's mansion with many dwelling places; a place of security, safety and comfort to which we are all invited.

As Stephen is confronted by the hate vested at him for nothing more than his love for the God of love, and as the stones rain down in their thunderous velocity, he sees Jesus before him, giving him the strength to endure and calling him as Jesus himself stands in his glory.

This is exactly the same reassurance that Jesus is giving his followers as we hear him speak in our passage from John's Gospel. He is giving them the vision they need to not only better understand their destiny as Christians, but also so that they might be able to overcome the challenges that will inevitably present themselves as they continue their journey under God's guidance in the world.

But there is one even bigger question that these passages throw up as we ponder them. If we are called to follow Jesus, if we are called to allow ourselves to be formed in his image, how does he lead us through this world, with all its difficulties and obstacles?

As our reading from Acts makes clear, being a Christian is bound to involve suffering and discomfort on some level. But in the face of that suffering, we must not deflect it onto others or put up barriers to protect ourselves at another's expense. As Stephen stands, the perfect example of humility and gentle godliness, and is then knocked to the ground and killed, he gazes at God's glory, but the vision he sees is undoubtedly a human Jesus.

The humanity of Jesus, God in human form, is not accidental to the way in which God relates to the world. It is an essential Characteristic of our God, who comes down to our level so that we might rise to his.

Our ever-giving Creator God makes the world from nothingness and never stops giving, even himself in Jesus on the cross, even to the point of death. If we take our faith seriously, then our commitment to the world can be no less full.

The result of what we see in and through Jesus, is the full knowledge that every part of God's world, even the darkest places, even death itself can respond to its Creator and be transformed by the experience.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of St Peter's First Letter, we find a wonderful description of what Christians are called to be, both individually and corporately. Our calling encourages us towards a new way of being and living; a new family and a new life. Once, we belonged nowhere, being blown back and forth with ever wind that blew; scrapping around for meaning, purpose and self-worth. If we are honest, we didn't find what we were looking for in our careers, our possessions or our other passions – all fell short. But in Jesus, we suddenly have purpose as god's own people, chosen, royal, holy. Just a motley crew of ordinary, slightly lost, people who have found their direction and richness in witnessing to the grandeur of God.

St Peter reminds us in his letter that we are invited to be built into the living temple of God, where he may be joyfully praised and faithfully served throughout our being.

That is what Jesus chose to do in this world, and this is the example he placed before us. And as St Stephen shows us, where Jesus leads, we should be content to follow.

Amen.

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