

THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE LORD

Feast of Saint Stephen

26 December Anno Domini 2010

Today is December 26th, the day of the Feast of St. Stephen, First Martyr; and, if nothing else, you know that Good King Wenceslas went to town on December 26 to the Feast of Stephen. As we cheerful few meet in worship this morning, the Gospel lesson hardly sounds like a cheery text to continue the Christmas holiday. But then again, maybe we'd better take a closer look.

I. THE LORD'S FAITHFULNESS, DESPITE MAN

The Lord declares, *"Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary."* Jesus tells the crowd gathered around Him that He will continue to send preachers to them in order to proclaim His Word. He also tells them that they will take these messengers, persecute them and kill them for the Word they proclaim. That's nothing new; summing up the lot of prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus declares that man has killed His preachers from A-Z, from Abel to Zechariah.

At first glance you read this text and feel sorry for the preachers; but that's not what this text is about. It begins, *"Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets..."* There's a "therefore," a reason why Jesus is sending these men to preach His Word. What is it? We have to go back and see the rest of Matthew 23.

In Matthew 23, Jesus warns the crowd to reject the Pharisees' doctrines because they burden rather than save. He then proclaims seven woes against these false teachers. He declares that, because they teach salvation by works, they shut the kingdom of heaven in peoples' faces. He says that, by their religious instruction, they turn converts into children of hell. (After all, before they were sinners who didn't know grace. Now, they've been taught to reject grace.) He warns that they see the temple gold as far more important than the Lord who dwells there in mercy. He denounces them because they enforce rules of how much mint and cumin one should tithe, but they ignore God's laws regarding justice, mercy and righteousness. Indeed, says Jesus, they pretend to be righteous by their actions, while inside they are full of greed and selfishness. They look alive on the outside, but inside are dead in their hypocrisy and rejection of God's Law. Finally, Jesus says, they decorate the tombs of the prophets, implying that they respect the prophets and consider themselves to be their heroic ancestors; yet, by their doctrine and practice, the Pharisees prove that they would have opposed and killed the prophets themselves.

It's a long, damning list of sin-and all seven of these woes are about rejecting the Lord and His Word. The hearts of the Pharisees is hardened against God, even as they pay Him lip service and claim to be His representatives. Contrary to their friendly appearance, they are serpents who lead many into condemnation. And many in the crowd are quite happy to follow them.

And after the long list of woes, what does Jesus say? He doesn't say, "Therefore, your time is up." He doesn't say, "Therefore, I'm cutting you off now." No in mercy He says, *Therefore, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city.* "You are faithless," declares Jesus, "but I'm faithful. And because I've promised that I will send My Word, I will continue to send preachers among you. You'll respond by persecuting and killing them. But I'm still faithful; and no matter how little you deserve to hear of forgiveness, I will still send these servants to proclaim My grace to you. Many of you will continue to do them violence, but My Word will accomplish what I send it forth to do; and some of

you will eventually repent, believe and declare of Me, *'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'*"

Is there any better example of the Lord's faithfulness than St. Stephen, whom we remember on this festival day? Stephen is chosen to assist the apostles, and he proves to be full of faith and able to preach the Word beyond dispute. Many debate him, but none can refute the Gospel that he proclaims. What do they do, Repent? No! They drag Stephen before the Sanhedrin, claiming he's guilty of blasphemy and deserves death. Stephen preaches an eloquent sermon of Law and Gospel, calling for them to repent so that they might enjoy the Lord's mercy. What does the Sanhedrin do? True to the form of sinful man, they call for Stephen to be stoned. It's just as Jesus said would happen in our Gospel lesson. Even as he is dying, Stephen prays that God would forgive his persecutors; but the stones keep on finding their mark until he dies. Another wise preacher sent by God has been executed for proclaiming the Good News.

Ah, but wait. While the Lord prophesied such persecution, He also declared that some would believe-that some would hear and eventually confess, *"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."* As Stephen prays and dies, who is holding the coats of his executioners? A young man named Saul. Saul won't repent yet; he'll persecute his share of believers before he believes himself. But on that tragic day of Stephen's murder, the Lord makes sure that His Word is preached into Saul's ears.

That's the hope that Jesus proclaims in this Gospel lesson. He is faithful to His promises of grace for sinful man. That is, after all, the reason for Christmas. Jesus didn't become flesh to test drive a human body. He became flesh to be the Sacrifice for sin. He knew well before Good Friday that sinful man would reject Him and crucify Him; but He came anyway, going to the cross for the sins of the world, so that all who believe in Him might not perish, but have eternal life.

Risen again, He remains true to His promises; and because He works through means, Jesus still sends preachers to proclaim His Word. The New Testament and subsequent world history record the world's reaction, as the Church and her preachers have suffered persecution again and again. But the Church and Word remain because the Lord is faithful.

And what of those preachers whom the Lord sent-those who suffered and died for simply preaching the truth? Was this unfair to them? It's not a question of fairness, but of forgiveness. The Lord provides the strength necessary to undergo trial, and the words to speak when brought before rulers. Those who are called upon to suffer for the Gospel receive the grace to do so. In fact, in time of suffering, they find that as their circumstances confirm the Lord's Word about the depravity of man, the Lord's grace and life shine forth all the more gloriously and certainly. Of such martyrs, the Lord says, *"The world was not worthy of them"* (Hebrews 11:28). By the grace of God, may the same be said of you and me.

II. Two Thoughts for the Feast of Stephen

The first is cause for joy. The Lord is faithful to His promises, and He will save His people. Our presence here, gathered in His name, bears witness to this. We are here as His beloved children for the sake of Son, not by any merit or worthiness in us. We may not hold the office of Pharisees, but we can certainly be partakers of their woe. Jesus admonition to them gives us much material with which to examine ourselves.

Has there ever been a time when you pointed to some work rather than God's love for redemption? Have you ever believed some doctrine that disagreed with the Lord's holy Word? Have you simply ignored God's Word in favor of what was convenient instead? The Pharisees valued the temple's gold more than the Lord who lived there; have you ever judged a church or preacher by appearance rather than by confession of faith? After all, the Lord is present by His Word and Sacraments, no matter the appearances. Have you insisted that your way is right, or conveniently excused some sins while ignoring

God's Law about them? Have you failed at times to practice justice and mercy toward your neighbor, by neglecting the poor or letting a bully run rampant? Have you dealt unrighteously with others? Do you suffer from greed, from self-indulgence at the expense of others? Do you put on a pious face on while you enjoying some favorite sins in private? Have you ever claimed to be following the footsteps of the saints, even as you left the narrow path of salvation in pursuit of self glorification?

The sins of the Pharisees are still alive and well. Each of them exists in us; and we commit many on that list without a second thought, because they seem so helpful and natural that it just makes sense to do them. For such sins, we rightly deserve the Lord's wrath and punishment. But look at how the Lord deals with us. On this St. Stephen's day, He again declares to us, "I became flesh and was born of Mary to be your Savior, not your executioner. I've gone to the cross and died for these sins. And even though you still fall prey to them, I still send My Word to you. I still keep My promise and give you My body and blood for forgiveness. You may not always like My Word, and you may want it to be quiet at times, but I still send it among you. Why? Because by My Word I give you life, and I would not have you die."

That's the first thought for this morning. As we wonder why the Lord continued to make sure His Word was preached among those sinful types who persecuted the prophets, we also marvel and give thanks that He continues to visit and shower His mercy upon sinful types like you and me. Indeed, thanks be to God.

The other reflection is one a bit more sobering. The world has not changed, and those who proclaim the Gospel are still persecuted. A man in Somalia sneaks into refugee camps in order to share the Gospel. Because of his evangelism efforts, a local Islamist group arranged the kidnapping of his three children. They were recovered this time, but the threat remains very real; in our world today, many risk their lives-and the lives of loved ones-in order to tell others of Christ the crucified.

In America, the situation is not so life-and-death, but the threats against the Gospel remain. Many Christians cringe at the idea of hurting someone's feelings, and therefore demand that congregations and preachers tolerate all sorts of false doctrine, bad practice and a variety of sins and immoralities. Far too often, preachers who remain faithful to the Scriptures are removed unjustly from their calls because their preaching of the Gospel fails to appeal to those who don't want to hear God's Law. Congregations which remain faithful to the Word of God in doctrine and practice might face pressure from authorities or the prospect of dwindling in size. This should come as no surprise-Jesus points out today that the same was done to the Old Testament prophets from A to Z, and the world is no more receptive today than it was back then.

And yet, we do not fear, even if we must also endure such suffering. The Lord promises that His Church will remain forever, and He will not forget or lose even one of His beloved children. Should we suffer persecution, be it the scorn of a friend or physical violence, such pain will only highlight the truth of the sinfulness of man, and the faithfulness of God! He remembered Abel and Zechariah. He remembered Stephen and Saul. He remembers you, and He will not forget.

Therefore, with all of the Lord's saints, we sing, "***Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!***" As promised, He comes to visit us today by His Word and Sacrament, to say, "***I will never leave you nor forsake you!***" And He is faithful to His Word and to you. In Jesus name, Amen and Amen!

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.