



Food for Thought for the 7th Sunday of Easter, Cycle C, 2022.

What is it about the 7th Sunday of Easter, that we might wish some clarification on how it transitions the Feast of Ascension to Pentecost? First off, we have to read those readings and Gospel before we can do anything else. Then we can pursue the next step...

Use some of the following investigative questions and statements to begin the process, while we ponder what it is we really think we want in this world, and how it either helps or hinders our pilgrimage to our eternal home.

1. What does it mean for me to really long for the living God? Will I take that to Pentecost?
2. Have I invited God into my life when I pray? What would happen if I did?
3. Will I accept the gifts from God and step out in my longing for Christ as St. Stephen did in the Gospel today, this 7th Sunday of Easter? Stephen's proclamation also becomes the occasion for his martyrdom. How is God the Father seen in this? **Hint:** OT Law & Prophets, = NT Angels & Saints.
4. What did he say that was so offensive to those who killed him? Was it his giving testimony to the risen Lord, as is necessary for those who call themselves Christians? For some it will cost everything, but it will cost something for each who are His.
5. Let's imagine a monologue of Saul speaking before his conversion as he stands before the crowd and orchestrates the death of Stephen. Then look at how Saul, as Paul in light of his transformation, picks up the story of salvation; not only for himself but for all whom he meets.

To acquire a better perspective, let us investigate St. Stephen a bit to gain some clarity of this Sunday's readings and a fulfillment of the Gospel.

The martyr, Stephen, stands at a turning point in the development of the early church. The conflicts that roared around him helped to push the new faith outside the orbit of Palestinian Judaism, and into the wider Roman Empire, and eventually into the entire Gentile world.

In some manner not described **STEPHEN** (stee' vuhn) GREEK: STEPHANOS "*crown*". Since the name Stephen is Greek, he was evidently one of many Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora, who are described in the book of Acts as "Hellenists" to distinguish them from the Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jews, who are called "Hebrews" (Acts 6: 1).

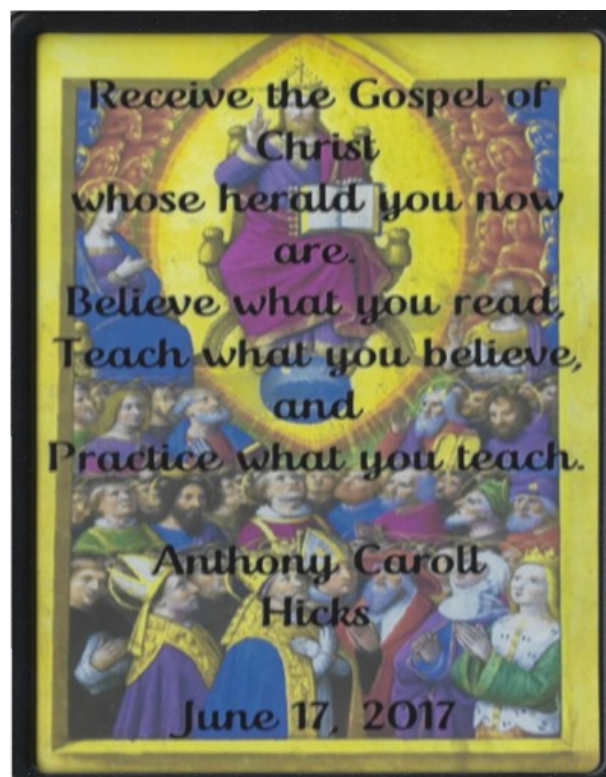
First-century Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city, populated by Jews who had emigrated from many lands. The attitudes and beliefs of such Jews were diverse. Some wanted to find points of unity between Judaism and the best of Greek culture. Others emphasized the distinct ways of Mosaic Law and temple worship. Whatever their attitude, Hellenistic Jews could not hide from the cultural differences of the Aramaic-speaking Jews of Palestine.



Jews from both the Hebrews and the Hellenists joined the disciples of Jesus, and Stephen was evidently one of the early converts among the Hellenists. He may even have known Jesus and have been among the 120 disciples who were present at Pentecost, for he is introduced in Acts as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). The catalyst that propelled Stephen forward as a leader of the Jerusalem church was the first substantial conflict among Christians recorded in Acts.

From the beginning, the rapidly growing church cared for its poor, including widows and orphans, through a daily distribution of food and other goods. In Acts, the split between Diaspora Jews and Palestinian Jews led to Hellenist widows being neglected in the distribution. When the Hellenists began to complain about this situation, "the twelve" who were all Hebrews from Galilee, saw the need to face the situation squarely. Through an assembly of the church, seven men were chosen, "men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:2, 3), who were to make sure the distribution was fair to all. All seven had distinctly Greek names, which probably indicates that the church chose to put seven leaders of the Hellenists in charge of the matter so that there could be no doubt about fairness.

These leaders came to be called simply "the seven" (Acts 21:8), corresponding to the twelve. Although they are popularly referred to as the first deacons of the church, Acts does not refer to them as such. The work of only two of them, **Stephen** and the evangelist **Philip**, is described in Acts, revealing that they were primarily active in preaching and teaching. These are the primary duties today that a deacon is charged with by the Bishop at his ordination during the laying on of hands. It leaves little doubt as to a deacon's role to serve.





Stephen was immediately embroiled in a debate concerning the new faith with Jews from the Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem. He was one of the first to see that Jesus' message could be a direct challenge to many of the most distinctive characteristics of Judaism that separated it from Gentile culture.

The debates are not recorded in Acts, but the impact of Stephen's arguments can be seen in the charges that were eventually made against him. Stephen evidently argued that the gospel of Jesus removed the need for temple worship, and all sacrifices and other rites required by Mosaic Law. To his opponents who, like Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, were zealous for the Law, Stephen seemed to "speak blasphemous words against Moses and God" (Acts 6:11). His power as a preacher and debater led Stephen's opponents to try silencing him.

The Jews brought Stephen before a judicial council on the charge of speaking "words against this holy place and the law" and of saying that "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6: 13, 14). Stephen's opponents saw the very existence of their faith endangered.

Stephen was given an opportunity to answer the charges, but he made no attempt to assuage his opponents or to defend himself by convincing the council that their charges were untrue. Rather, he used the occasion to make a forceful attack on his opponents.

Following an ancient scriptural tradition, he reviewed the history of his people, highlighting their repeated rebellions against Moses and other prophets sent by God. Stephen challenged the very idea that God should have a fixed temple built for him.

Finally, he used the phraseology of the Scriptures to mount a blistering denunciation of his hearers: **"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?"** (Acts 7:51-52). This ancient attitude, now realized in the present, Stephen charged, had led to the betrayal and murder of "the Righteous One" (Acts 7:52), whose coming the prophets had foretold.

The speech turned the judicial council into an enraged mob while Stephen, realizing what was about to happen, saw a vision of Heaven with "the Son of man [Jesus] standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). (Referring back to Daniel as he bore witness to Jesus at the right hand of God receiving the kingdom (Dan 7: 13-14). *Note: A king in the ancient world stood when passing judgment or sentence, and all that Stephen spoke of is now being committed again by the leaders against him.* (No servant is greater than his master.)

The throng rushed at Stephen, took him outside Jerusalem, and stoned him to death. Just as Jesus had prayed "Father, forgive them" and "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23:34, 46), so Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:59, 60).



The death of Stephen marked the beginning of an onslaught of persecution directed primarily against Hellenist believers. It was a mob that was led by Saul, who was a consenting witness to Stephen's execution. (Unless a grain of wheat fall to the earth and die it remains but a grain of wheat, but if it dies it will produce much fruit!)

In man's eyes it's a moment filled with supreme irony as, a few years later, the seeds planted by Stephen's phraseology of Scriptures that resulted in his death are used by God as they've ripened, and God calls Saul to become an apostle of the new faith and bring the work of Stephen to fulfillment. (That's a Diaconal moment of fulfillment!)

And so it is that we have a bit more clarity in reflecting upon the opening instructions we received, that we may better understand Jesus' thanks to the Father for the gift of His disciples to witness His glory. Jesus' promise for Pentecost comes when He asks that where He is, they also may be.

Growth in true holiness depends on having a proper companionship with the Spirit of Jesus, as it is within the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Yours in Christ,

Deacon Hicks

P.S. Can you see the "[Role of the Angels](#)" in the Easter Season?

References from: *The Martyr Stephen*, by Ghirlandaio (1449-1494), and the Holy Scriptures.