

Today, we celebrate and remember St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. When the Jewish religious leaders crucified Christ, they thought that they had eliminated followers of “The Way,” which is how the early Christians were collectively known. But soon the leaders realized that the followers of Christ were convinced that Jesus was God and they persisted preaching salvation through Him. This problem hadn’t died of with its leader. In fact, it seemed to increase through persecution. So the Jewish establishment turned to violent persecution of the followers of Christ, and St. Stephen was the first of the Christians they killed.

The natural question asked today in cases like this is, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” We may also hear, “Why do bad things happen to Christians? If what we believe is true, then shouldn’t only good things happen to us?” Many people use this fact to argue against Christianity. “If God is good and powerful, why does He allow bad things happen to good people?” Now are many ways to answer this, but for the next couple of minutes, let’s consider the story of Stephen as it pertains to these questions.

First of all, it is important to note that Stephen spoke out boldly against those who should know better. Our epistle lesson began at verse 55, but in the few verses before that, Stephen addresses the Jews in this way:

Ye stiff-necked 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 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.

Stephen spoke the truth to them with boldness and clarity. No wonder they raged at him and dragged him away to be stoned. Now, could they have listened and repented? Yes, in theory;

but in practice they were very far gone down the road to perdition, convincing themselves that they were doing good by killing the ministers of God. St. Stephen spoke the truth even though it cost him to do so.

Next, note that, although Stephen confronted their evil directly, he did not do so out of hate, but out of a desire to see the Truth of Jesus Christ advanced. God had come, but they would not bow down to Him. Instead they would kill the messenger of God; they would kill Stephen, like they had always killed the prophets of God before. We know that Stephen did not hold a personal vendetta against these men. Our epistle lesson ends, "And he knelt down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Stephen confronted the evil, but ever desired to see these men repent and turn to Christ.

Finally, we note that when they took him out of the city to stone him, "a young man named Saul", obviously approving, stood by watching their cloaks. We know that this Saul would become Paul, and would be instrumental in spreading the gospel throughout the world. Paul became, in fact, the apostle to the gentiles. It has been said that the Church is watered by the blood of the martyrs, and in this case it seems to be true. Christ's suffering established the Church, and our suffering too, will bring growth to the church. The world sees when the church perseveres through suffering.

So is this a complete answer to the problem of pain? No, today we only brush over the top of the subject lightly. All of us will experience times of distress in life, and attempting to explain occurrences of suffering by rationally discussing them does not really address the problem. There is not a simple closed-form solution to the problem of pain.

Today, let us be thankful for the example set for us by St. Stephen. May we follow his example, clearly speaking the truth to those who oppose Christ. But let us do so not out of hatred or malice, but out of love. Every person bears the image of God, and in Christ, every

12/26/2023

## **Feast of St. Stephen**

3

person is redeemable. Let us speak clearly, but with an eye to salvation for those to whom we speak. Finally, let our suffering be used of God for the building of the kingdom. Act with conviction, speak in love, suffer for the Church, for whom Christ also suffered and died.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.