

Easter 5



April 28, 2002

Prayer of the Day

O God, form the mind of your faithful people into a single will. Make us love what you command and desire what you promise, that, amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Acts 7:55-60

{55} But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. {56} "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" {57} But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. {58} Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. {59} While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." {60} Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

55. filled with the Holy Spirit: Peter was "filled with the Holy Spirit" in Acts 4:8, and the first Christians were "filled..." in Acts 2:4. It indicates "God's presence to human beings or to the world in the form of a breath or forceful wind active in creating..., raising up leaders..., inspiring prophecy..., judging..., and renewing the face of the earth...." [1] In Acts 6:5 Stephen is characterized as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit."

he gazed into heaven: Stephen is one of the seven Hellenist deacons (Acts 6:5). He has defended himself against a charge of "uttering blasphemous words against Moses and against God.... saying things against [this] sacred place and the law.... claim[ing] that this Jesus the Nazorean will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us (Acts 6:11, 13-14). Now, having indicted the members of the synagogue of the Freedmen as "betrayers and murders" (Acts 6:52), God grants Stephen a vision heaven and of his Lord as he faces death.

the glory of God: "the resplendent aspect of Yahweh's majestic presence," [2]

standing: Only here does "Son of Man" stand instead of sit (Mark 14:62; Matthew 26:64; Luke 22:69). Though commentators have offered a variety of explanations for the Son of Man (Jesus verse 55) standing, [3] Stephen would have seen Jesus as standing to welcome him into the presence of the glory of God.

at the right hand of God: Jesus stands in the position of honor at the right hand of God as the king is invited to do in Psalm 110:1.

56. the Son of Man: "Here, as in 1 Enoch the Son of man appears as a heavenly being, ready to perform eschatological functions; and here he is identified with the risen and ascended Jesus...." [4]

57-58: The crowd reacts to Stephens' description of Jesus' honored position in heaven and stone him. While the trial seems to have been properly constituted, the stoning is more in the nature of a lynching.

57. they covered their ears: They emulate the righteous in Isaiah 33:15.

58. began to stone him: Stoning is a punishment for religious offences in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 13:2-6; 17:2-7; 22:22-23; Leviticus 20:2-5; 27; 24:14-16; Numbers 15:32-36) or for those which are forbidden by the law (Exodus 17:4; Luke 20:6; John 8:5; 10:33).

a young man named Saul: This young man is, of course, the apostle to the Gentiles, St. Paul (Acts 13:9; 1 Timothy 1:13). "Witnesses probably piled their cloaks at the feet of Saul, because he was known to them personally and probably attended the synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9), and

because he was a Roman citizen." [5]

59-60. *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.... Lord, do not hold this sin against them:* Stephen emulates his Lord (Luke 23:46; 34).

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

{1} In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. {2} Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. {3} You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, {4} take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. {5} Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.... {15} My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. {16} Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

In Psalm 31 the singer seeks refuge with Yahweh, and pleads for protection and deliverance from his/her enemies. (S)he calls Yahweh a rock, a strong fortress and a refuge and declares that his/her life is in Yahweh's hands.

5. *Into your hand I commit my spirit:* The word used here for "spirit" is the Hebrew *ruah*, the breath of life. The singer puts his/her life into Yahweh's hands. In Luke 23:46 Jesus speaks these words as he dies. The same idea is present in verse 15: "my times are in your hand."

16. *Let your face shine:* See Numbers 6:25. Yahweh's shining face is a sign of grace and favor.

save me in your steadfast love: The singer places himself/herself under the protection of the covenant and calls on the God of the covenant to save him/her.

1 Peter 2:2-10

{2} Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation-- {3} if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. {4} Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and {5} like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. {6} For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." {7} To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," {8} and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. {9} But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. {10} Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

2. *Like newborn infants:* The people Peter was writing to are reminded of their baptismal rebirth. It is not so much that they are recent converts, as that they need continued spiritual nourishment as they "grow into salvation."

3. *if you have tasted that the Lord is good:* Adapted from Psalm 33:9 in the Septuagint (Psalm 34:8 in Hebrew and English Bibles). There is an allusion here to the Lord's supper, but also a general allusion to the Christian's experience of the goodness of the Lord.

4-10: "The passage is notable as representing one of the largest collections of OT images in the NT." [6] Christ is the living stone and Christians are also living stones built into a house (family) of priests. They are a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices to God. Exodus 19:6 is the background for the notion of a holy priesthood, and that is also the background for verse 9.

Once you were not a people...had not received mercy: The verse reflects Hosea 2:25. God creates a people that did not exist before. They are nobodies who have been constituted as God's people through his mercy, as he did when he created the people of Israel out of a mixed multitude in Egypt. The purpose of God's action is so that they may proclaim Christ's mighty acts (verse 9).

John 14:1-14

{1} "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. {2} In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? {3} And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. {4} And you know the way to the place where I am going." {5} Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" {6} Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. {7} If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." {8} Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the

Father, and we will be satisfied." {9} Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? {10} Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. {11} Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. {12} Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. {13} I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. {14} If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

1. Do not let your hearts be troubled: Since the heart is the seat of thought and reason, the idea is not to be confused or troubled in mind by what God is doing.

Believe in God, believe also in me: Jesus calls on the people to trust him as they trust God. This is an implicit claim to divine authority. "The term *believe* is a key part of the Johannine antilanguage; it has a special insider meaning for his core group. John's peculiar way of phrasing it—believing "into" Jesus—connotes being completely embedded in the group of which he is the central personage." [7]

4. the place where I am going: The word "place" is not in the Greek text. "The disciples ought to know that Jesus is going to the Father, and that the way lies through the shame and glory of the crucifixion and resurrection." [8]

5. How can we know the way: Thomas' question builds on Peter's question in 13:36, "Lord, where are you going?" and Jesus' answer telling Peter that he cannot accompany his Lord now.

6. I am the way, and the truth, and the life: We should understand: "I am the true and living way," that is, "The way whose character is described in terms of [*aleitheia*, truth] and [*zoe*, life]." [9]

No one comes to the Father except through me: Everyone who comes to God has come on the way which is Jesus, knowingly or not.

7. If you know me, you will know my Father also.... and have seen him: This is a restatement of John 1:18: 18 "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

8-9: Philip's question shows that he has not comprehended the relationship between the Father and Jesus. Jesus displays impatience with Philip.

9. Whoever has seen me has seen the Father: See John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

10-11: Having told Philip, "I and the Father are one," Jesus further explains that relationship in terms of words and deeds.

12. the one who believes in me will also do with works I do...and, in fact, will do greater works than these: As Jesus does the works of the Father, the disciples will do the works of Jesus. This is said in a different way in John 20:21: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

13. I will do whatever you ask in my name: Asking in Jesus' name is not to use a magical invocation. To ask in the name of Jesus will insure that what we ask will also be in accord with his spirit. Mark 10:35-40 shows that requests of a personal or self-indulgent nature are not granted.

So that the Father may be glorified in the Son: What is asked will be answered in such a way that the Father is glorified. That may have unexpected results.

Reflection

Jesus was not sent by God so we might have or be or do whatever we would like. Jesus called us to submission to the Father's will, to unity with other believers. He promised that when we seek to do the Father's will he will do whatever we ask.

Stephen was martyred by those who had not yet found their way to the Father's house. One who was present and approved of the murder of Stephen became an apostle, an apostle to the Gentiles, and led the church to redefine its boundaries so that they agreed, not with human wisdom but with God's intentions. "It would be mistaken to lay too much stress on the Christological significance of the vision; its effect is to confirm what Stephen has already said."

[10]

There are several aspects of contemporary, popular Christianity that come under scrutiny. The freedom to make personal decisions; the notion that *we* should decide what we should do; the

value of personal faith; the redress of injuries, especially those suffered for the faith; God as a source of personal blessing; escape from danger, threat, and suffering, death included; the notion that God's intentions can be easily grasped are all put in question by these lessons. No doubt many will be made uncomfortable by them.

Still, we need not be concerned. Jesus told us not to worry about it (John 14:1), to put our faith in him and in God, to trust God, and to put ourselves at his disposal without limit. Then we can pray the prayer of the day with integrity. Our times are in His hand.

In the words of the Psalm we can hear the prayer of Stephen and others who, facing death for their faith, have found refuge with God.

Hymns [11]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

520 E--Give to Our
210 D--At the Lamb's

464 D--You Are the
822s II--O Christ the

819s II--Christ is Made(747v)

697v II--Wash, O God

702v G--I am the Bread (762s)

700v G--I Received the (761s)

302, 487, 513, 336, 469, 352,

747v

Prayers of the People [12]

P or A: Trusting in God's guidance to pray rightly and justly, bring your petitions and intercessions before God saying, "Hear us, O God," and responding, "You are our way, our truth and our life."

A: Build us into your spiritual house, your holy priesthood, that all of us may offer spiritual sacrifices that are pleasing to you and living-giving to others. Bring to your church unity and peace. Hear us, O God, You are our way, our truth and our life.

A: Teach us responsibility to participate fully in our duties and privileges as Canadians and citizens of the world. Raise up leaders who will gladly and competently serve, never degrading or persecuting those with whom they disagree. Give unity to our country. Hear us, O God, You are our way, our truth and our life.

A: Let those who are suffering or sick in any way, remember that whoever believes in your Son will not be put to shame and are always in the sight and mind of God. We remember especially _____, grant your peace. Hear us, O God, You are our way, our truth and our life.

A: Guard us from temptation and give peace in believing to those who are anxious or depressed. Hear us, O God, You are our way, our truth and our life.

P: Once we were no people, but now we are your people. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy. We thank you for your mercy and for answer to prayer. Give us courage to serve you clearly as did your deacon and martyr Stephen, through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

Or [13]

Presider or deacon

As a royal priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices, let us pray to God for the needs of every living creature.

Deacon or other leader

For the holy churches in every place, and for the unity of all.

For this holy assembly and for all who seek in Jesus the way, the truth, and the life.

For NN and all illumined by the light of Christ.

For N our bishop and the presbyters, the deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

For the world and its leaders, our nation and its people.

For all those in trouble and need, and for those injured by malice and guile.
For those who have died in the resurrection of Christ and for all the dead.
For ourselves, our families, and those we love.
Remembering the blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

Blessed are you, God our Father, who calls us to dwell with you in heaven. Hear the prayers we offer this day, and draw your holy people to your side. Glory to you for ever and ever.

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Notes

- [1] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1998, p. 196.
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 392.
- [3] *Loc. cit.*; C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, volume 1, pp. 384 f.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- [5] Fitzmyer, *ibid.*, p. 394.
- [6] Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 150. The following references are noted by Achtemeier: v. 6b=Isa 28:16; v. 7b=LXX Ps 117:22; v. 8a=Isa 8:14; v. 9a, c-e=Isa 43:20-21; v. 9a,b=Exod 19:6; 10a, b=Hos 1:6, 9; 2:3, 25.
- [7] Bruce M. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 230.
- [8] C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*. London: S.P.C.K., 1962, p. 382.
- [9] "Schweizer, 166," cited by Wilhelm Michaelis in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. by Gerhard Friedrich) Vol. 5. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967, p. 81.
- [10] Barrett, *ibid.*, p. 383.
- [11] <http://www.worship.ca/text/rcla0102.txt>
- [12] http://www.worship.ca/text/inter_a2.txt
- [13] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>