

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

June 2, 2019

First Reading - Acts of the Apostles 7:55-60

Responsorial Psalm - Psalm 97

Second Reading - Revelation 22:12-24, 16-17, 20

Gospel - John 17:20-26

My dear people of God:

Allow me to start our reflection today with this statement: WE ARE ALL INVITED TO REIGN WITH THE KING AND TO PARTAKE OF HIS SWEETNESS; ANYBODY, WHOSEVER.

Let us recall that Stephen was one of the first seven deacons mentioned in chapter 6, verses 1-7. These deacons were chosen based on two criteria: (1) they were in the company of the apostles early on, (2) and of their probity and fullness of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They cared for the widows and the orphans while the apostles continued their preaching ministry.

Then, in verses 8 -15, still on chapter 6, we learned that Stephen excelled among his fellow deacons and got the ire of the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) - Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia, who began to argue with him.

Obviously, the wisdom of the Spirit gave him authority while he spoke to his adversaries. They fabricated lies and claimed that he blasphemed against Moses and God. They seized and brought him before the Sanhedrin. *“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel”*. This is how chapter 6 ended.

In chapter 7, from verses 1 to 53, we would learn that Stephen full of wisdom, preached to the Sanhedrin using Scriptures, starting from Abraham and his descendants till Jesus, the righteous prophet of God. He accused them of

disobedience to God's law. The members of the Sanhedrin were furious and ground their teeth at him in anger.

Our first reading would begin on verse 55, which says: *“Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God”*.

Brothers and sisters, please know that the word “glory” here means not only the wonderful things from God, but more so on the aspect of God's majesty; an aura associated with God's appearance that reveals God's majesty to humans. And Christ shares God's glory:

- (1) the glory of the Lord was revealed at His birth (Luke 2:9)
- (2) His disciples, Peter, James and John, were privileged to see Christ's glory on Mount Tabor (the Mount of Transfiguration in Luke

Please note that the members of the Sanhedrin cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed at him and threw him out of the city, and stoned him. Did they cover their ears so that they wouldn't hear Stephen's *“blasphemy”*? Or was it just a *“perceived blasphemy”*?

But Stephen has already called them *“uncircumcised in heart and ears”* in verse 51, which means that they had already stopped their ears from hearing Godly messages that they didn't want to hear anyway. So, what is new here?

Brothers and sisters: the members of the Sanhedrin covered their ears and stoned Stephen not because they thought he was a blasphemer, but **BECAUSE THEY REMEMBERED PETER'S PREACHING ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST**. Shameful as it was, they covered their ears because they knew that the vision that Stephen saw was reminiscent of Peter's discourse in chapter 2, verses 14 to 42 of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

Peter, quoting Psalm 110:1, interpreted it with great wisdom and courage saying that Jesus Christ was now glorified in heaven, and He was coming back to earth to judge unbelieving Jews. They knew that they were doomed for judgment.

Let us try to understand what Peter said. He claimed that by their behavior, Jews were not merely God's “enemies” as Psalm 110:1 says, but now, they were His “foes” (in verse 35 of chapter 2) because they had *actively opposed*

and were still actively opposing God's purpose and plan for them by rejecting Jesus Christ who died at Calvary.

Peter's preaching pricked the hearts of the ordinary Jews. They asked what should they do. Peter replied: ***“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost”*** (Acts 2:38).

Now, back to our first reading. Let us recall the phrase **“JESUS STANDING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD IN HEAVEN”**. The Sanhedrin knew that Jesus standing at the right hand of God would affect them, not Stephen. These council members and Jewish religious leaders recalled the Old Testament prophecies. They knew what **“Jesus standing”** meant, and it was a scary thing for them. They knew very clearly what Isaiah said in chapter 3, verses 13 and 14: **“The LORD stands up to plead, and stands to judge the people. The LORD will judge the elders and leaders of his people”**. There was no way to refute Peter's earlier discourse now that Stephen declared that he saw heavens opened and Jesus was standing.

What is the point here? The point here is that Stephen **affirmed** what Peter preached at the Pentecost that Jesus Christ was coming back to earth, **to pour out His wrath on unbelieving Israel**. They knew that they were convicted. And they were afraid that the divine wrath that Peter was speaking of, was now even closer.

Lamentably, instead of repenting (unlike the ordinary Jews), they stoned Stephen. As he was being stoned, Stephen said: ***“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”*** He knelt down, and cried with a loud voice, ***“Lord, don't hold this sin against them!”*** When he had said this, he fell asleep.

We can draw two parallels between the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen:

- (1) both cried out **“receive my spirit”** .
- (2) both asked forgiveness for their killers before they breathed their last

Now, let us go to the Second Reading. These are very reassuring words from John, or should I say, from Jesus Himself as recorded by John. Verses 12-13 from chapter 22 would tell us, ***“behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with***

me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

These are very strong words for the new believer in that era from the Lord Jesus Himself; spoken to erase any doubt and fear on the part of the weak Christian during persecution. The reward would surely be great because it comes from the Alpha and Omega. John continues in verse 14: *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates”*. We thank God that we are bound for heaven. We pray that all men would be there, yet we would wish too that all must not refuse to wash their sins by His blood in order to be there.

Verse 16 continues: *“I, Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.* This is a very reassuring declaration from the Book of Revelation to members of the newly founded churches, but persecuted. Jesus is the new conqueror, like David. Jesus conquers sin, removes fear, and fortifies virtue.

I love the way the last invitations are worded. The desired effect of these invitations should be the opposite of what the members of the Sanhedrin did in the first reading: they remained stubborn.

The Spirit and the bride say, *“Come!”*. *Let the hearer say, “Come!” Whosoever thirsts, come forward, and the one who wants to receive the gift of life-giving water, come”*. This is an invitation to us who have a spiritual thirst: all of us!

And so, I say:

(1) To the parish landscaper who says: *“I don’t understand all the Catholic doctrine and theology, I just want to give my share to making the parish grounds look nicer”*, Jesus says: *“Come anyway ! Who said that only those who understand can come? Come and be quenched”*.

(2) To the wayward teenager who might say: *“I do not get anything from attending Mass, that priest is so boring”*, Jesus says: *“Come anyway! Who said that only those can get something from the Mass and are entertained can come? Come and be quenched! Take the water of life freely”*.

(3) To the womanizer-husband who might say: *“I don’t know if I can live the Christian life the way that I should, I provide well for my wife and family*

anyway”, Jesus says: “Come anyway! Who said that only those who can live the Christian life and are good providers can come? Take the water of life freely”.

(4) To the struggling daily wage-earner, who waits for a job at the parking area of Home Depot, who might say: *“I don’t know if religion makes sense to me, all I need to do is to make my family survive ”*, Jesus says: *“Come anyway ! Who said that only those who understand religion can come? Take the water of life freely”.*

My dear people of God: Let us remember this: ‘WHOSOEVER’. What a big word! There is no standard height, size, nor weight: little sinners, big sinners, any sinner who has displeased the King, COME! If Jesus were standing at the door of Walmart, He would surely say: *“One size fits all. Take the water of life freely”.*

Allow me now to speak in the first person singular: If this is my desire, then I am freely invited to come, if I am only willing. There is no barrier between me and Jesus except my stubborn will.

Now, let us go to the gospel.

We continue hearing the “High Priest’s Prayer” of Jesus. Our gospel started this way: Lifting up His eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed, saying: *“I pray not only for them, but also for those also who believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one; as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory which you gave me, so that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one; that the world may know that you sent me, and you loved them, even as you loved me.”*

Let us recall that in verses 7- 19, Jesus prayed for the disciples. Now He widens the circle to include those who will follow. It is safe to conclude He assumes that the life-witness of these disciples will be effective and fruitful.

Brothers and sisters, it would be extremely beneficial for us to know that Jesus is praying this “High Priest’s Prayer” for all us today. Right now, we can assume that Jesus inserts into our “prayer list” the names of our fellow church-goers seated on the pews in front of us and on the pews behind us. Jesus prays “that those who do not like each other (but still want to be the leaders of certain ministries/movements in the parish) may all be

one. Certainly, it would be beneficial for me to hear Him mentioning names of parishioners whom I do not want to pray for – because to my perception, they are obstructionists. The list is long.

He is also praying for Cursillistas who think they are holier and less crazy than the Charismatics, and vice-versa; Family Life Apostolate members who think they are better than the members of the Marian Movement, and vice-versa; members of the Catholic Women's League who think that they do more than the members of the Ladies of the Altar, and vice-versa; the Knights of Columbus who think that they contribute more than members of the Holy Name Society. The list is long.

And He is also praying for priests like me to become more Christ-like; for us priests who think that we should have been assigned to a richer parish, for us priests who think that we work harder than the priests of the neighboring parish. The list is long.

Jesus is praying not only for individual parishioners, not only for the entire parishes, not only for the entire Roman Catholic Church, but also for all churches in the entire world. The list is very long.

Jesus wants all of us worldlings to believe that indeed God the Father sent Jesus to make ONE WHOLE CREATION MADE MORE BEAUTIFUL BECAUSE OF THE LOVING TOUCH OF THE DIVINE.

Ecumenism is a blessing. We must get rid of the divisive acts that shame us and celebrate the similarities that unite us.

Brothers and sisters, we know that unity multiplies the effectiveness of our witness. A divided church loses persuasive force. Let us do all that we can so that we will achieve unity. Jesus prays for the unity of believers. Paul was right in saying: *“There is neither Jew or Greek, there is neither slave or free man, there is neither male and female; for all of you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:28).

Jesus had *“made known to them your name, and will make it known”* (verse 26). This is THE NAME of the DYNAMIIC GOD “YAHWEH” or “I AM WHO I AM” that Moses heard from the burning bush in Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai) in the Book of Exodus, chapter 3, verse 14. Jesus had made known that His Father is a saving God who is firmly and deeply in love with us, His people, so much so, that He wants to save us.

Jesus had made the great objective of His Father that the whole redemptive plan is aimed at one single target: THE WORLD. Jesus Christ is the authentic voice of God the Father.

Today, let us listen to the prayer of Jesus for us; let us listen to God's invitation for us to be transformed by His Name, so that we – all of us, anybody, whosoever - could partake of His sweetness and reign with Him for all eternity. Amen.