

## **“Die, Stephen, die!” Acts 7:55-60**

**“But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

There are some things that we learn from the Scripture, or we should say from the events recorded in the Scripture that are deeply disturbing and very uncomfortable. Nevertheless, they are written for our warning and also encouragement.

Today’s reading from Acts, the stoning of Stephen, gives us a much-needed opportunity to reflect on some of those unpleasant realities. Let’s see what they are. Now, who killed Jesus? Who decided to kill Jesus, who plotted to kill Jesus, who demanded to kill Jesus? Who were those people? Remember?

The religious leaders, the best among us, or we could say, the church leaders of that time. Why did they do that? Had Jesus done anything wrong? No, they did it because what Jesus was teaching didn’t fit with how they wanted to lead.

“Repent and believe in the Gospel!” Thus Jesus...

Who stoned Stephen? Who were those people? Some evil robbers? Some unbelievers upset about his preaching? No! Again, the church leaders of that day were responsible for that. Why did they do it? Because Stephen spoke the truth.

Because he was calling them to repentance. Imagine, and I hadn’t made this connection till this week, when I was preparing this sermon – Stephen was standing before the same group of religious leaders, where not so long ago stood Jesus.

Some of those present likely were present when Jesus was questioned on that last night, or when the apostles were questioned for the miracles that they had performed and their preaching of the resurrection of Jesus. How much can we harden our hearts? How deaf can we become while believing that we are just fine?

Closer to our time. 16<sup>th</sup> century. Remember that poor monk, who was overjoyed discovering the Gospel, burning with the passion for everyone to hear the liberating truth of God’s grace and forgiveness. Martin Luther was his name.

Who wanted him gone? Who plotted to kill him? Yes, the church leaders of that day. Why? Because Luther was speaking the truth of the Scripture and it didn’t fit with their agenda, with how they wanted to run their institution.

And we could come even closer, we could come to our days and start reflecting on what has happened during the last few years in our own church, most recently in our seminary, in the Australian Lutheran College.

“Repent and believe in the Gospel!” It is the most gracious invitation. It is the Lord Himself calling us to turn to Him, to admit where we have erred, sinned, disobeyed Him and to hear from Him: “I forgive you, let me restore you, let me embrace you!” It is the most heart-warming invitation: “Come, return to me!”

If... if we are willing to admit our sins and our errors. But if not, then those can be the most infuriating words that one can hear. That explains those cries: “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” That explains the fury in this case with Stephen: “Are you accusing us! Us?! Who do you think you are! Die, Stephen, die!”

“Don’t harden your hearts, repent, turn to me, let me embrace you!” Thus Jesus...

Somehow, not by my own choice, but St Stephen has a special place in my life. When I graduated seminary in Latvia – and was a good student, at least so I was told – after 4 years of intense studies my ordination was postponed. Indefinitely.

By whom? By our church leaders. Why? While I was still a student, there was a lovely lady professor among our faculty members. She didn’t seem to be interested in the Scripture, she was fascinated with traditions of the Roman Catholic church; now she has been ordained and serves as a pastor somewhere in Germany.

I was foolish enough to speak out about what she taught. Nevertheless, finally I was ordained. When? On the day of St Stephen, first Christian martyr, on 26<sup>th</sup> of December. Not sure what it means, but different trouble has been finding me since.

What shall we conclude? Is every church leadership like those we mentioned earlier? By no means! Of course, not! Only those who don’t want to listen to Jesus. Only those who want to side-line the Word of God to further their agenda.

Only those who don’t want to keep their vows and teach and uphold their church’s teaching. Only those who value their institutions more than they value the faithfulness to the Word of God. Only those... And in such situations, we should be ready to say with the apostles: “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

You may have heard the name of Dr Jordan Peterson. He is a Canadian professor of Clinical Psychology. He became famous around the world speaking against the madness of our culture, against destructive ideologies. He is often praised by his supporters as someone so courageous, someone who dares to speak the truth.

When he reflected on this praise in one of his interviews, he said that those people have misunderstood him. That he is not courageous. Instead, that he is afraid. He is afraid of what will happen if he doesn’t speak out against the evil that he sees.

He said that we all want to avoid conflicts and confrontations. We all prefer peace. However, he said, when you see evil rising there is no way of escaping that confrontation. That is an illusion, a fool’s hope to think that maybe it will go away.

Our only choice is to decide when to engage, as early as possible, when there is still a chance to change things, or later, when that evil will come upon us and we won't be able to do much anymore.

Please, consider what he said! I believe that he nailed it. But, can we be courageous enough in our situation to speak about how things are truthfully, openly, calling them by name, if needed calling our brothers and sisters to repent? Can we?

I don't know... You remember a few weeks ago I invited you, if you so wished, to sign that letter that a group of pastors had put together stating that we simply want to uphold the church's teaching that we have vowed to uphold.

More than 80 pastors signed that letter and more than 400 laypeople. Quite a few from our congregations. Once again, forgive me, that I didn't inform you about that opportunity in a timely manner and didn't give you enough time.

Why am I mentioning this? After this letter was made public, as I was told, there were many emails thanking that group of pastors for their courage and their public confession. What?! Courage?! Are you joking? Obviously not...

This begs a question – in what miserable state are we as Christian community, if pastors simply saying that they want to keep their ordination vows is perceived as an act of courage. Wouldn't that be a norm, a minimum expectation?!

What does it say about our situation? How low have we fallen? It seems to be acceptable, when someone openly mocks what our church teaches, even those sitting in the highest positions of authority, but when someone says that they want to uphold their vows, that's a sign of courage. Let this sink in!

What does it say about the spiritual state of our church that even knowing that something is wrong we may be hesitant to say it aloud? Is that a fear of God, or fear of people? What will others think of me, if I say that I believe that God actually means what He says in the Bible. They may think that I am a narrow-minded unloving fundamentalist. How confused has our church's culture become?

There is someone in the Bible whose actions are described as sowing confusion. His very name means exactly that – diabolos. We know him as the devil. And he is certainly having a field day among us. How fearful have we become?!

Please, notice, this is one of the ways we can see how much we have been shaped by the surrounding culture of "tolerance", where lies and perversions are celebrated but truth attacked as immoral and unloving. And we don't even notice it anymore.

This is why Paul reminds us: **"Do not be conformed to this world,** but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom 12:2)

In today's Gospel reading Jesus encourages us: "Stop being troubled in your hearts!" Why are we troubled, why do we fear? When you think about it, that is about us feeling that we are not in control. And the truth is – we are not...

But... Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer is in control. Always has been. Always will be. He was in control when He was brought before those religious leaders. He was in control when we went to the cross. He was in control when Stephen was brought before the same religious leaders and when Stephen was stoned.

He is in control now. He is. When our church drifts further and further away from the One who alone is the Way and the Truth and the Life, where faithful pastors who want to uphold their ordination vows are leaving the LCA, Jesus is in control.

One of my most vivid memories from my studies in St Louis is about something one of my professors, Dr Robert Kolb, said. He was and is one of the nicest people you can imagine. Jana used to call him “walking Gospel”. Because he just was.

He said to his students that there is one thing that troubles him a lot. If he ever was in a situation where he had to choose either rejecting Jesus or losing his life, he was troubled because he thought he would not have the strength to remain faithful.

But then he continued, saying that he also trusts that if such a day came, the Holy Spirit would give him all the courage necessary to make that good confession. It is true. See, Stephen was no different than we are.

He wasn't some fearless confessor. He was just like you. But at that moment he was filled with the Holy Spirit just as Jesus had promised it would happen: “When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

That is what happened with Stephen. And as he spoke filled with God's Spirit, he **“gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”** Jesus was right there, looking at Stephen, encouraging him, rejoicing in his confession, waiting for him.

You are no different than Stephen. The same Jesus is in control over all your circumstances. You have received the same Spirit. And as Jesus faithfully leads you through this life, He reminds you that your prize will be the same as Stephen's.

You will see the Risen Lord Jesus reigning over His New Creation, you will be welcomed by Him with open arms and you will reign with Him forever. For He already has prepared a place for you. Of that you can be certain.

One last thing. Already on His cross Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And the last words of Stephen were: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” We need to remember that those who are deceived by the world and have lost their confidence in the Word of God, they are not our enemies.

They are captives of the enemy, and the Lord willing one day we will feast together with them in the never-ending heavenly feast. But for now, as we strive to confess the truth as Stephen did, we also need to pray: “Father, forgive them... and do not hold this sin against them.” As for us, we should learn from the apostles to rejoice if we are, indeed, found worthy to suffer for Jesus' sake. Amen.