

2019.06.02 homily Easter7-C5 by Fr. Gabor

It is quite rare that the Gospel writers mention anything about deacons, but in today's first reading we hear about how Stephen, the first deacon of Christianity is stoned to death, because of his perseverance in faith giving witness to Jesus, in the midst of harsh and unjustified treatment. While being stoned Stephen looked into the sky and prayed for his persecutors. This act of prayer completely goes against any human instinct. This is not how we are wired up normally, because we would normally defend ourselves and try to save ourselves. In case of Stephen there is no sign whatsoever that he would want to do this. In fact he seems to ignore the imminent danger of death. This sort of loving and merciful behaviour in the face of evil and death can only be explained by a supernatural experience; He is behaving like someone who is in total and complete love with someone else; and since He is praying to Jesus while facing his own death we can have only one guess about whose love fills Stephen's heart: Jesus. Jesus' courageous love that knows no fear; a love that draws the beloved to the lover into complete heart to heart union. That love is the Holy Spirit; a love that everyone's heart longs for; a love which is stronger than the power of evil; a love that stops you from saving yourself; a love which is only concerned about oneness with the Lover. This exact same love fills the heart of St. Justin martyr whose memory too the Church celebrates today. I wish my heart was filled with this same love all the time. We know from the 1st reading that Stephen's whole being was completely immersed in this love, because the 1st reading starts with saying that he was filled with the grace and power of the Holy Spirit; he was baptised with the Holy Spirit, and so the promise of Christ, which He gave to the apostles at His Ascension, was fulfilled in the case of Stephen.

Through the faith and actions of Stephen the Lord Jesus's prayer, which we heard in the Gospel reading, is also fulfilled in many ways. Jesus prays for union between himself and his dedicated followers. Now as Stephen prays in the face of unjust treatment and death his heart to heart union with Jesus comes across clearly through his words, because Stephen uses almost the same words as Jesus did on the cross as He prayed for His persecutors: 'Lord do not hold this sin

against them', and Stephen utters his prayer for them with the same love and mercy as Jesus did.

Another part of Jesus' prayer is also fulfilled; namely that those who belong to Him may see the glory that the Father has given to Jesus. We heard from the 1st reading that 'Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into Heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand'. This reminds me of what happened at the Transfiguration where Jesus was clothed in His glory, so that He can be confirmed and strengthened for his approaching suffering and death. God the Father doesn't let us alone either when we suffer. He strengthens us; He gives us the grace we need to be able to face our trials, and even more, He through the unifying power of the Holy Spirit makes us one with Jesus so much so that we no longer live separately from Him, but He lives in us and we in Him, and so in Him we also become an image of the heavenly Father.

This is how we as a Church community become the living Body of Christ through which during every Mass Jesus offers His sacrifice for the world. Our daily sacrifices with a contrite humbled heart out of love for God and unity with Christ are not two separate issues. Sometimes sacrifices are not comfortable or attractive, but certainly they prepare us to receive even more from the Father, because in response the Father and the Son always fills our hearts with their love; the Holy Spirit. Through our sacrifices we may lose something and even ourselves, but what we lose is rewarded with the experiences of our union with the living Lord Jesus Christ.