

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 7 May 2023**  
**Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year A**

**1st Reading: Acts 7:55-60**

**Psalm: 31:1-5, 15-16**

**2nd Reading: 1 Peter 2:2-10**

**Gospel: John 14:1-14**

**Sermon** - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

“As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”  
<sup>60</sup> 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.”

So wrote Luke about the very first Christian to die because he was a Christian, just a few short years after Jesus’ own death and resurrection. And we hear in this passage just how strong Stephen’s faith was, as he accepted his death as a martyr, a witness to the truth of Jesus. And indeed, his words echo some of the words Jesus himself had spoken on the Cross as he was dying. Jesus had said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”. Stephen said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”. Jesus had said of those who were executing him, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. Stephen said, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”. I wonder if we would be able to act with such faith and love if we were in the same situation, but we might be surprised how the Holy Spirit might strengthen us if we were called to be such witnesses.

But then Luke tells us something curious. He writes that “when Stephen had said this, he fell asleep”. Now, when I was a lad and I heard this story, I thought that Stephen actually lay down and went to sleep, that God had made him rest so that he didn’t feel the stones hitting him - and there are some stories about martyrs, such as Polycarp, who were spared suffering as they were martyred.

But no, Luke means that Stephen died, and some translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version, simply state that “when Stephen had said this, he died”. These translations assume that Luke is just using flowery language, a euphemism, to avoid making the harsh statement that Stephen died. But the more I have read the New Testament, the more I realise that Luke is actually making a very powerful statement here. Paul, too, in his letters to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians talks about Christians who have “fallen asleep”.

If you are familiar with Handel's *Messiah*, you will remember Paul's words: "Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."

And I noticed that the two times Jesus talks about people who had fallen asleep - Jairus' daughter and Lazarus - those listening to him do *not* understand that he is talking about death. Those at Jairus's house laugh at him because they know the girl is dead. And Jesus' own disciples think that he is talking about natural sleep when he says that Lazarus has fallen asleep. So "falling asleep" was not a common way of talking about death.

Instead, I have come to realise that the authors of the New Testament are giving us their insight that when *Christians* die - and it is *only* Christians that are said to have fallen asleep when they die - are not really dead, but are in a very real sense merely asleep, awaiting the Resurrection when Christ will return and awaken us. Remember in John's Gospel Jesus says "if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death", so the New Testament authors seem to be picking up on what Jesus is saying and affirming that if we trust Jesus, we will not die, but will merely sleep for a time.

And Jesus in today's Gospel, again affirms that as Christians our life continues even after death: "I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also". And Paul echoes this when he writes to the Philippians that "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ".

Hmm... Citizenship. We tend to think of ourselves in terms of what country here on earth we are from, whether America, or perhaps another country like Britain. Coral and I happen to be dual citizens, and are proud of both our countries. But Paul says that our true citizenship is in heaven.

Well, I don't know if any of you watched the coronation of King Charles yesterday, but I thought it was very very interesting. And if you were able to listen to it closely, you may have noticed that the ceremony was far more about the kingdom of heaven where our true citizenship lies, and about *Christ* the King, than it was about the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and King Charles. The main theme throughout the coronation ceremony was that King Charles is actually the servant of Christ.

It began with a choirboy approaching Charles and saying: "As children of the kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of kings." to which Charles replied: "In his name and after his example I come not to be served but to serve."

And as he was anointed king, the Pentecost hymn was sung:

“Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,  
And lighten with celestial fire.  
Thou the anointing Spirit art,  
Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart  
  
Praise to thy eternal merit,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”

And the two hymns sung by those congregated in Westminster Abbey were:

“Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation” and “Praise My Soul the King of Heaven” - not praising the king of Britain, but praising Jesus Christ, the King of Heaven”.

And in recognition of the Gospel of Christ, King Charles and his queen received the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Some commentators wanted to tell us that all of this was just a relic of times gone by, an ancient ritual that no one pays attention to any more. And those same commentators would also tell us that the story of Jesus, and of his followers like Stephen, is all meaningless and made up.

But those commentators are wrong. This was a living ritual, affirming the truth and reality of the Gospel of Christ, and how that Gospel is the foundation for our life, whether as citizens of Britain, citizens of America, or citizens of heaven.

Those participating in the coronation of King Charles proclaimed that Gospel of Christ just as Stephen had done. And we, too, by coming here to church, and by receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion, are giving our witness, just as strongly as Stephen did, of the truth of Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter how few or how many we are - our actions together proclaim the Gospel to the world.

And does it do any good? Well... Did Stephen's proclamation of the Gospel do any good? When Peter preached on Pentecost, 3000 people became Christians. But the people to whom Stephen was talking didn't want to listen, and they stoned him to death. And yet... There was one young man standing by, holding the people's cloaks, and the words of Stephen continued to haunt him until he himself, Paul of Tarsus, encountered the truth of those words and met the living Jesus on the road to Damascus, and his conversion helped to change the world.

So we never know how God might use our words and our worship to inspire others. Just like Stephen, then, just like all the saints and Christians down through the ages, and just like King Charles yesterday, we proclaim the Gospel that Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life” and that “no one comes to the Father except through” him. Jesus is indeed the Church's one foundation. Christ *is* made the *sure* foundation.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

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