



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Feasts of the Circumcision and the Commemoration of the Feasts of St. Stephen & St. John, January 1st, 2012

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Today we are celebrating a whole bunch of feasts including that of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr and the patron saint of our parish. St. Stephen was a highly unpopular man in his day, and he would not have been any more popular in today's climate. Stephen had the courage to go against the grain; the guts to make waves at a time when everyone was telling him to stay cool and keep a low profile.

The Church in those days – two or three years after the Resurrection – seemed to be an exclusively Jewish sect. It operated solely within the Jewish orbit: preaching the Gospel only to Jews and proselytes (Gentiles in the process of converting to Judaism). Stephen put an end to the exclusiveness. He preached the message that Gospel of Jesus Christ was for all mankind – Jew and Gentile, without distinction; that the old Covenant had been superseded by the New.

Nowadays, it seems natural to assume that all was sweetness and light among those early Christians. Read the Scriptures, however, and you'll find it was not the case. Stephen was one of seven men selected to try to resolve a petty factional quarrel, prototypical of so many that have afflicted Church life throughout the centuries. The problem was rooted in foolish prejudice and it had caused a deep rift in Jerusalem's small Christian community.

The native-born Judean Jews despised foreign-born Greek-speaking Christians, both Jews and Gentile converts. Acts tells us that the Greek-speaking Christians' needy widows were

shortchanged in the daily distribution of charitable relief. Not surprisingly, this caused an outcry among the Greek-speakers.

It didn't make sense for the Apostles to abandon the work of spreading the Gospel to mediate the administrative and pastoral disputes that arose in the every day life of the Church. Thus, they called the community together and told the members to choose seven men of wisdom and integrity, known to be deeply inspired by the Holy Spirit, to handle such matters. These seven men were the first deacons.

Stephen was the first deacon selected, then, by turn, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas. There is a tradition in some quarters of the Church that all seven men were gentiles. Certainly, some of them have Greek-sounding names. But this was quite common in the Holy Land at the time of Christ and, moreover, St. Luke – a scrupulous historian – singles out only one of them, Nicholas, as a proselyte or gentile convert to Judaism.

The new deacons swiftly settled the dispute within the Christian community. Luke reports that soon after their appointment the Church started expanding rapidly. People don't rush to join any organization – and most especially a church – that is riven by factional strife and infighting.

Luke also makes it clear that the remarkable growth was, in large part, inspired by the power of Stephen's preaching and the miracles of

healing that he performed. Not surprisingly, in such circumstances, the Christian community's enemies suborned witnesses to accuse Stephen of blaspheming.

In choosing the word "suborn," it seems likely that Luke is implying that some of the witnesses came from within the Christian community, itself. Nor should this be entirely surprising -- because Stephen didn't shy away from telling his fellow Christians things that they didn't want to hear. We can get a very good idea of the sort of message Stephen was preaching from the defense speech he delivered during his trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of state.

He was a man facing the death sentence. Blasphemy was a capital offense. Even so, he didn't pull a punch. Speaking entirely without notes (we can tell this from the fact that he makes a couple of minor errors in his scriptural quotations), he castigates the Jewish religious leadership -- and, by clear implication, the Christian community as well -- for failing to understand Holy Scripture.

He then proceeded with a step-by-step analysis of the Old Testament, proving that God intended his salvation to be for all mankind, not just for the Chosen People. It was wrong, Stephen declared, the Jewish religious leadership to try to exercise a monopoly on the worship of God in Jerusalem; and -- by clear implication -- that it was equally wrong for Christians to restrict Christ's Gospel to Jews.

Citing Isaiah, Chapter 66, Stephen pointed out that God proclaimed he would be worshipped by all people through out the world: "The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye have built unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made . . . saith the Lord."

This left Stephen's prosecutors speechless -- for they were as familiar with the Book of Isaiah as he was. They knew the 66th Chapter prophesied the revelation of God to the Gentiles and, moreover, the utter destruction of Jerusalem should there be an attempt to frustrate God's purpose.

Instead of trying to answer Stephen, they howled him down. He refused to be silenced. And

during a lull in the tumult, he proclaimed the divinity of Christ, echoing the prophecies of Daniel: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." That was the final straw. His accusers, now a howling mob, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death.

But Stephen's courage had not been in vain. Within weeks of his death, the church's mission to the Gentiles had started in earnest. His fellow deacon Philip had departed for Samaria to preach the Gospel to the Samaritans -- the people most bitterly hated by the Jews of those days -- baptizing the first Gentiles, including a Eunuch from the royal court of Ethiopia.

Within weeks, a ringleader of the mob that stoned Stephen to death -- the man who guarded the coats of his murderers and led the persecution of Christians that followed the lynching -- had been miraculously converted. Saul of Damascus, the persecutor, became Paul the Apostle; the man who, more than any other, was to be responsible for spreading Christ's Gospel throughout the world.

Within weeks, the indecisive St. Peter had seen a vision on the roof of the house of Joppa in which he was told: "What God hath cleansed call not thou common." It was this vision that led him to baptize an entire Gentile household -- that of the Roman centurion Cornelius. "Of a truth," St. Peter told Cornelius, "I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted by him."

Perhaps the two most important lessons we can learn from St. Stephen is that, first, Christ came to save everyone, regardless of their class, condition and creed -- not merely those whom we find socially acceptable.

The second lesson is that all it took to overthrow more than a thousand years of intense cultural conditioning was one solitary saint. A single human being might seem a singularly frail instrument to pit against entrenched prejudice and suspicion, but, as we read in the Book of Acts, Stephen was "full of faith and power and the Holy Spirit," -- and nothing in this world can stand against the forces God commands. *AMEN.*