

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 7:54-60; John 17:11-19; Hebrews 7:11-27

He is risen! He is risen indeed! What is there to fear?

Father, sanctify us in the truth; Your Word is truth. Amen.

He looked around. What had he done wrong? Nothing, really. In fact, all he had done was what God had called him to do. He hadn't hurt anyone. God certainly wouldn't have Him doing violence to his neighbor. He hadn't imposed his beliefs upon anyone. Faith is not something coerced or forced. He hadn't taken what was not his. No, he had overseen the dispersion of charity. He hadn't dishonored the authorities. Rather, he submitted to them until the very end, even when they tyrannically and wrongly condemned him. What had he done to be thrust into this predicament? Nothing, really, but the same was true of his Master, his Lord, who also had stood wrongly condemned and convicted, a lamb without spot or blemish, the great High Priest, sacrificed once for all for this persecuted man's sins and the sins of the whole world.

He looked around. He had a choice to make. On the one side, there was a chance at life, perhaps even the praise of his peers for his decision, an opportunity to hug his loved ones again and wake up another morning, another day to enjoy the blessings of this world. On the other side, there was death, a painful death. On the one hand, there seemed to be good for him. On the other hand, bad. At least that's how it looked on the surface.

And yet he was still torn. And so he did what we do best to do at such times. He prayed. Then he looked around again. He still had the same choice to make. He weighed his options, time versus eternity, and he made it. To hell with all the rest; heaven was too much to trade for an easy out, a quick release on cross bearing and suffering. And the stones began to fly.

You make a choice like his every day, although perhaps not in as dramatic a situation, not in such dire straits. But you have the same options: time and eternity. What have you chosen? When faced with losing another chance at the life you've wanted, or the praise of your peers, or the blessings of this world, let alone your temporal life, how have the scales hung with your salvation bobbling on the other side? Have you backed down, or God forbid, even apologized, when called to account for having done nothing more wrong than believing what God has clearly said, and not for hurting anyone (except, perhaps, for their already, though secretly, troubled and uncertain conscience), and not for imposing your beliefs (after all, the supposedly tolerant, who tolerate everything but Christian truth, often tell us that everyone ought to be comfortable saying what her or she believe), and not for taking what isn't yours (although perhaps instead for offering what Jesus freely gives), or for dishonoring the authorities, or anything else, but merely for being a Christian and confessing your Christian faith in word and deed?

You make choices every day. Have you made Christian choices? Or have you put fancy words on sin, or at least not contested others doing so, and adopted the nomenclature of the world, with its alternative lifestyles and gender egalitarianisms that twist God's created order into an unrecognizable mess, and choices that end in body parts in garbage cans, and unwed couples playing marriage as test runs, as kicking the tires, as whatever else one might choose to call it, and lying becoming stretching the truth, and gossip masked as journalism. You make choices every day. Would anyone ever even think of throwing a stone at you?

Would they recognize you in the least as standing with Stephen? Or would you fit better as those in the back, behind the stone-throwers, unwilling to stand with a brother in our supposed faith, yet too timid to take up a stone against him as well. That is called being lukewarm, and the lukewarm are precisely those Jesus promises to spit out of His mouth in His words to the Laodiceans in Revelation, *“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”*

Jesus knew the world in which His Apostles remained as He ascended to heaven, the world He would govern for their journey through much tribulation to their eternal good. The devil is a roaring lion. The flesh is selfish and insatiable in its desire for dying things. The unbelieving will believe anything that isn't in the Bible—the same people who won't go a day without reading their horoscope will mock Scripture, who read a novel as fact will call well-attested history recorded in Holy Writ as fiction. Jesus knew where we would remain. And so He did what we do best to do in tight circumstances. He prayed. He prayed in our Holy Gospel:

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

How is your prayer life? I know you have more than enough to pray for. Are you praying? Are you speaking to Him whose ear is attentive to your cry for mercy? He has not left you as orphans. He has promised to see you through, to see you even through stones and your last breath to life everlasting with your Rock, Redeemer, and Jesus.

The very Word that the world has so little patience with is the very Word that will bring you patience, bear you up and help you press on toward all the fullness of life with Him who spoke it. And there is nothing in the meanwhile that you cannot face that He has not faced for you, that He cannot sympathize with, that numerous and untold saints before you haven't endured as well and unto glory. Stephen might not be fun to stand with, but next to him and with him is where to stand, because he stood in Christ, and now he is ever with Him and before His throne, and that, my friends, is the place to be. And at those times when you start to wonder if it is truly so, if it is worth it, consider again what our Lord considered worth it for you, and how He is still living and active for you:

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

There is no stone that can shatter such dying and rising love. There is not trial so great that it is greater than what He has done for you. Amen.