

Martyrdom: The future of the baptized

Acts 7:44 – 8:8

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ALMIGHTY God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give commandment to the Apostles that they should go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature: Grant to us whom thou hast called into thy Church, a ready will to obey thy Word; and fill us with a hearty desire to make thy way known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (From the [Canadian Book of Common Prayer](#))

Well, here we are at day 35!

Some of you are probably saying: “‘Day 35’ of what? Today is May 29.” Others out there are probably saying: “No, no. I know what today is. Today is Race Day!”

Well, we’re all right. But, when I say that today is day 35, I mean that it’s the 35th day since Easter, 5 weeks ago. In fact, we’re soon coming up to the 40th day after Easter, a day 5 days from now that marks the day according to Luke, when Jesus departed from the 11 as He ascended into heaven to take His rightful place at the Father’s right hand.

By that day, Jesus, who had been raised from the dead by the Father, had spent 40 days with his closest followers. By Thursday he would have been with his disciples for 40 days, almost 6 weeks. Showing convincing proofs that he was indeed raised from the dead but also continuing to teach them all that they needed to know while they waited.

“Teaching them all that they needed to know”. But, as we saw last week, the apostles -- those who are going to be sent into the world -- were still not formulating their questions very well. In fact, Luke records only one thing that the apostles said say to Jesus during the 40 days that he was with them. It was a question:

vs. 6 “So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?””

As you may remember, I said to you that this question was the one that all Jewish men had been asking for centuries and it was certainly the reason that the apostles had followed Jesus. They had thought that he was the one who was going to restore Israel to being the greatest world power. Something that it had begun to be under David and Solomon. Jesus’ followers were crushed when Jesus was taken away and instead of being made king, was tried, tortured, and then crucified like the worst criminal.

But, now that he was back, though they couldn’t understand how he was back, perhaps now, like an archangel which Jesus must have resembled to some extent, now, perhaps, they said to themselves, “Lord, NOW will you restore the Kingdom to Israel?”

I said to you last week that Luke records this one statement by the apostles during the 40 days because it is so important that Theophilus, who has paid a hefty sum for Luke to get the story right, hear just how wrong this question is and why, as John Calvin said, “There are as many errors in this question as [there are] words.” It was so wrong because it showed the apostles looking back to what they had been taught to hope for, rather than forward to what God wanted. The mission on which the apostles were going to be sent was not going to be about what they thought God would do based on their past experiences as individuals or as a people; it was going to be about what God intended to do, and now, in Jesus had begun to do.

What God was going to do was not at odds with what God had always intended to do. What God was going to do was save the world, including Israel. But, what Israel, instructed by the Jewish teachers in the Temple and Synagogue, had forgotten or perhaps even ignored, was that God’s intent was to save the world and that Israel was simply to be the vehicle by which God would do that.

But now in Jesus all that Israel was supposed to have accomplished had been accomplished. Jesus literally became Israel to save the world, including Israel. In Jesus all the experience of Israel and all the experience of God with Israel were summed up. In Jesus the mission that God had given to Israel was perfected: Jesus, not Israel, took upon Himself the sin of the world and finally, once and for all, became the one, sufficient sacrifice and offering for the sins of the whole world. After Jesus there will be no more need for sacrificial offerings in the Temple, no more need for Israel to accomplish the task for which it had been set aside to lead the world to salvation. “It is finished”, “it is accomplished”, says the Lord Himself from the cross. And as proof of God’s acceptance of this sacrifice, behold, the Lord now stands before them in risen glory and will now ascend... in just days... to his heavenly authority.

It is done.

But, then, what about the apostles, those whom Jesus has gathered? What then is their task if it is indeed accomplished?

Their task has always been, while they have been with Jesus, before his death, and now in these 40 days of resurrection glory, to be prepared to bear witness to what God has done in their midst, and to do so truthfully.

They will do this right where they are, in Jerusalem. Then they will bear witness in the region around Jerusalem, in Judaea, all the way from the Jordan on the East to the Mediterranean on the West.

Then they will bear witness in Samaria, the land of their hated half-breed cousins to the north of them.

And then wonder of wonders, they will bring their witness of the mighty acts of God in Christ to the whole world, even where there are no Jews, and where there are only the pagan and immoral Gentiles. To Asia Minor, to Greece, to Italy, to Spain, even to the islands of the Angles, Saxons, Picts and Celts. Why, they will even bring the message to that strange people that live in the darkest parts of Frisia.

Their mission was to go where no Jewish man had ever trod. Why? To announce God’s salvation of the world in Christ and to bear witness with confirming signs and wonders that this salvation was indeed true.

No more sacrifices to God in Jerusalem or to false gods on strange altars. No more sacrifice of children and young women. No more war in the name of God.

The apostolic charge was to announce to the nations “It is over, and it is done. Let God bring the peace to you that He has already won for all in Christ, who is prince of peace”.

And as proof, the apostles did miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. Miracles, not magic. They did things like the kinds of things that Jesus had done as Luke describes them in his first volume. They began to do just what Jesus had said and done. They began to fulfill what Jesus had told them that what their charge was. He had said: You will be my witnesses, an English translation of the Greek word “martus” or “martyr”. You will be my “martyrs”, that is, witnesses, throughout the world. That is what “martyrdom” means: “witnessing”.

Now, at this point you may be breathing a sigh of relief. Because you may have seen the sermon title for today and thought: “‘Martyrdom’? Uh oh. This is going to be rough. It’s all about dying. But now I hear you saying that the meaning of ‘martyr’ is actually ‘witness’. So, I guess that means that this isn’t going to be about death. Right? One doesn’t have to die to be a witness, isn’t that right?”

In order to be able to answer that question we need to ask another question first: how were these incompetent and illiterate farmers able to do what they eventually did? That is, who did these men who were sent -- the apostles, that’s what the word means “sent” -- how were the apostles able in the end to do what Jesus had told them and bear witness?

Jesus had already told them on or about day 35: ‘You are in no position to bear witness right now. You can’t even ask the right questions. So, wait here in Jerusalem until you receive power from God to be my witnesses.’

And then, a few days later, on day 40, he left them. Alone. In the upper room, gathered together.

For 10 more days, they waited and waited, prayed and prayed. And nothing happened.

And then suddenly 50 days after Jesus had been crucified and raised from the dead, on that Pentecost, at about 9 in the morning (Luke records it), the Holy Spirit fell on them with a power that shook them, pushed them out the doors of that upper room into the streets of Jerusalem, acting like drunk men and women. (Oh yes, there were women among the 120 gathered in that room that morning when the Holy Spirit came!) They began to proclaim the mighty acts of God in the languages of all the Jewish pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the feast from all over the world.

What had happened? Put simply: They were not themselves anymore. God had taken control by the Holy Spirit who was using them to declare the acts of God. They were not the same, fearful, ignorant men and women. They were new people.

What had happened? Well, as Luke looked back over the story and wrote it up for Theophilus, he realized that from the time that Jesus had called these men from their day-jobs, through these 50 days, they had been slowly dying to their selves, to their old expectations and hopes and fears, and that now, on this 50th

day it was as if they had been reborn to new bodies and new experiences and new hopes. Luke looks back on that 50th day as the real birthday of the church.

Over the next 5 chapters of his book of Acts, Luke shows how they were reborn. Luke describes these illiterate men and women as doing miracles that were like those of God acting in Christ. He shows these illiterate men and women proclaiming that the power to do what they were doing did not come from them but from God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. And they said it boldly and eloquently. They did so to such an extent that the Jewish leadership was dumbfounded and could only fear that, while they had done away with Jesus, they were now contending with 120 new Jesuses out in the streets of Jerusalem!

So they took as many as they could find and they put them in prison and tortured them, hoping that that would stop them. But it didn't.

And then as Luke proceeds through the story, we find even more being clothed with the Holy Spirit. Men like Philip and Stephen in Acts 6 and 7.

One of them, Stephen, is the one whose story you heard the end of in today's Scripture reading. Do you remember Stephen? Stephen was a waiter. Not a waiter like the apostles in Jerusalem... waiting for the Holy Spirit. Stephen was a man who waited on tables, helping to distribute and serve food to the widows of the Christian community. But, how does Luke say he was chosen for this task, along with Philip and the others? The Spirit says to the Church: Set apart for us men full of faith and who demonstrate that they have been empowered by the Holy Spirit.

But, Stephen very quickly goes from being just a waiter to doing exactly what the apostles are doing. In chapter 7 we see this non-apostle giving witness by preaching the longest sermon of any sermon in the book of Acts. He bears faithful witness. And how does it end? You heard the story: Stephen nears the end of this very long sermon in which he has rehearsed God's faithfulness to Israel and Israel's constant reticence to serve God. And Stephen closes with the words that so enrage the crowd.

Here's what Stephen tells them:

God gave Israel a tent of worship, to keep us moving on mission. But, Israel wanted a Temple so that it could be like all the nations around it. The King, who was David, and who was only the second King that Israel had ever had -- remember why they even had a king: because all the nations around them had kings! Do we see a theme here?? -- David asked God to be able to build the Temple. But, God wouldn't let David build the Temple. In the end, Solomon built one anyway.

And then Stephen concludes his sermon, literally in the shadow of the great Temple in Jerusalem:

48 Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, 49 `Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? 50 Did not my hand make all these things?` 51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. 52 Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. 53 You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

And the result is... Stephen's death. Many call this his "martyrdom" and speak of Stephen as the first "martyr" of the church. That's true only to the extent that it is the first actual death, but it is not the first witness of the church. It is, however, a vivid picture of what ALL witness is and what it must lead to when it is the kind of effective witness that Jesus has told his apostles to prepare for: for all effective witness to God in Christ involves death, even as Christ died, and only then breathed on his followers the Holy Spirit. The witness to God is not to be with their own words but with the words of one who now speaks through them as they are clothed by the Holy Spirit.

Stephen is Luke's clearest picture of how, when that happens, the Lord Jesus himself is seen by those around. Look at verses 54-60:

54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. 55 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; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. 58 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. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Jesus came to full life as Stephen died to the fullest, so that even Stephen's last words are those of Jesus himself against those who are killing him: Father, forgive them. This is the kind of witness that is to characterize the Church in all future generations, where our words and deeds simply echo the words and deeds of the incarnate Son of God.

The result of Stephen's witness, even in death, is to drive the church out once again. But this time it is not into the streets of Jerusalem but out beyond Jerusalem to Judaea and Samaria.

8:1 "On that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

And so the promise that Jesus had given the apostles while they were still in Jerusalem -- you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" -- that promise begins to be fulfilled.

And through Saul, at whose feet the garments of Stephen are laid, and who will later die to himself as he is grabbed on the road by God in Christ, the witness will go even further afield, even to the ends of the earth.

All these -- the apostles, Saul, Stephen, Philip -- all of these are witnesses. They are witnesses because they have died to self and in dying to self and becoming alive in Christ, they have become witnesses, continuing to die daily so that the work of Christ can be made known through them to the world.

This is what Paul later wrote about in his letter to the Romans when he said that

Romans 6:3-4 ... all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death[.] Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

The fact is: all of those who are baptized into Christ are part of the true apostolic succession in the church. All those who die with Christ will be sent into the world to bear true witness and there they will die some more so that Christ can be fully seen in them.

This is why, as one of my fine Roman Catholic colleagues has said: the true goal of baptism is martyrdom.¹

My friends, this is about us, isn't it? If we have been baptized, we have been sent and we shall be effective in our witness. Because we have died already with Christ and been raised to new life through the empowering by the Holy Spirit to continue to do what Jesus began to do and teach by being sent into the world to bear truthful witness to the mighty acts of God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, so that the truth can be known.

But, if we are witnesses, then we will continue to die and to be made more fully alive in Christ, as individuals and as a church. Like the first apostles, we too may want to cling to this life, but the Spirit will push us into the public spotlight even if we don't want to be. We will die a little each time as we are ridiculed for our witness, criticized for it, maybe even killed for it.

But, this is our new life in Christ. It is not for our sakes, but for the world, to make the salvation that God has brought about for the world, known and owned in the world.

Some of you may have read in yesterday's paper about my colleague at the University of Ottawa, Peter Beyer, and his research into the religious commitments of immigrants to Canada, and their children. If so, you will have noted that one of the biggest problems for Christian children of immigrants is the fear that if they make their Christian faith and commitment known in public -- to friends at school or at work -- they will be mocked for it.

Some of you may have read that and said: 'That's sure true', and bemoaned the state of things in Canada.

The problem with that reaction is that it ignores that this is the way things have always been. The world will always need true Christian witness that is costly and that requires that the witness, the martyr, die, even in Canada. We may have thought that we could get away without dying but if we did, we were living more with the kind of false hopes of the apostles than the Pentecost experience of the 50th day. We may have thought we could rule on our own as Christians but Jesus has never asked us to rule but rather to die and in dying to rule with Him.

There's a contemporary rock group -- I'm pretty sure that they're not Christian -- who put it better than I've heard a lot of Christians put it: Everybody wants to change the world but nobody wants to die.²

¹ See [Fr. Pierre Ingram's presentation](#) to the "We Believe" series, held at St. George's Anglican Church Ottawa last year (March 21, 2010).

² Unfortunately, the lyrics by "My Chemical Romance" are profoundly nihilistic. It is not death for others, as embodied in our Lord and in the witnesses (*martyrs*) who follow him to the cross, but death pure and simple, that is exalted in the song. Nevertheless, these few lines do catch a significant truth, and one that many young people may hear more attentively through this medium than through the Scriptures.

As a young man, I had lots of dreams of changing the world. But I became a Christian when God took me and showed that, even though I had great ideas about changing the world, I had no ability on my own to do so. Then God, in His grace, showed me that He had begun to change the world already and that I could be part of the change. But first I had to die to myself and my goals, so that He could live in me. And thanks be to God, he was faithful.

What I didn't know was that he was also going to ask me every day afterwards to continue dying.

God is saving the world. He calls us to be witnesses to those who are living in the world that He is doing this. He can use me, and He can use you. But first we need to know that we will die in the process. In baptism, this process has begun. By the power of the Holy Spirit, it will continue.

At the end of last week's service, Harold Vandermeer said to me: I think I get it. The Father has done his part in sending the Son. The Son has done his part. The apostles have done their part. As a successor of the apostles in the proclamation of the Word, you have done your part. I guess now it's up to us now to do our part. I could not have made a better summation of the challenge.

Let us pray.

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. ([The Collect for the 6th Sunday of Easter, Year A, RCL](#))