December 26th: Feast of Saint Stephen, first martyr

Gospel text (*Mt* 10:17-22): Jesus said to his disciples: “Beware of men, for they will hand you over to courts and scourge you in their synagogues, and you will be led before governors and kings for my sake as a witness before them and the pagans. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child; children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved.”

“They will hand you over to courts and scourge you”

Fr. Josep Mª MASSANA i Mola OFM
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Today, just having savored the deep experience of the birth of the Child Jesus, the liturgical scenery has changed over. We might think that celebrating martyrdom does not fit with the Christmas charm... The martyrdom of St. Stephen, whom we revere as the First Martyr of Christianity, falls squarely into the theology of the Incarnate Son of God. Jesus came into this world to shed His Blood for us. Stephen was the first who shed his blood for Jesus. We read in this Gospel as Jesus Himself announces it: they will hand you over to courts and... you will be led before governors and kings for my sake as a witness” (Mt 10:17/18). Precisely "martyr" means exactly this: witness.

This witness in word and deed is given thanks to the force of the Holy Spirit: "the Spirit of Your Father... will speak through You” (cf. Mt 10; 19). As we can read in the "Acts of the Apostles", Chapter 7, Stephen, brought to court, gives a superb lecture, by making a tour through the Old Testament, while showing that it all converges in the New Testament, in the Person of Jesus. Whatever had been announced by the prophets and taught by the patriarchs is fulfilled in Him.

In the narrative of his martyrdom we can find a beautiful Trinitarian allusion: "Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7.55). His experience was like a taste of the Glory in Heaven. And Stephen died as Jesus did, by forgiving those who sacrificed him: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7.60); he said his Master's words: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34).

Let us ask this martyr to let us live like him, full of the Holy Spirit, so that, by fixing our gaze into Heaven,

we can see Jesus at the right hand of God. This experience will allow us to already enjoy Heaven, while we are still on Earth.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- "Stephen, Strengthened by the power of his love, he overcame the raging cruelty of Saul and won his persecutor on earth as his companion in heaven" (Saint Fulgentius of Ruspe)

- "If not all are called, like St Stephen, to shed their blood, each Christian is, however, asked to be consistent in every circumstance with the faith that he or she professes" (Francis)

- “Since Abraham, intercession - asking on behalf of another has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy... In intercession, he who prays looks "not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others," even to the point of praying for those who do him harm (Acts 7:60).” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2,635)

Other comments

“They will hand you over to courts and scourge you”

Fr. Joan BUSQUETS i Masana
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Today, the Church celebrates the feast of its first martyr, Deacon Saint Stephen. At times, the Gospel seems rather baffling. Only yesterday, it was evoking joy and happiness at the birth of the infant Jesus: “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (Lk 2:20). Today, instead, it alerts us to oncoming dangers: “Beware of men, for they will hand you over to courts and scourge you in their synagogues” (Mt 10:17). Those who witness the joy of Christ's birth as shepherds must also be as gallant as Stephen in proclaiming the death and resurrection of the Child of everlasting life.

The same Spirit who overshadowed Mary, the Virgin Mother, to announce God's plan of salvation, the same Spirit who descended upon the Apostles empowering their courage to start proclaiming the Good News —the Gospel— all over the world, is the Spirit who gave strength to that boy to argue with the priests at the synagogue who “could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke” (Acts 6:10).

Saint Stephen was a martyr in life. Martyr means “testimony”. And because of the way he died he was also a martyr. In life, he heeded his Master's words: “Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are

to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say" (Mt 10:19). "But Stephen, filled with the holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). Stephen saw this vision and said so. So too should today's Christian witnesses of Jesus Christ through eyes of faith, fearlessly proclaim Him in plain language and courageous action.