

# FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

---

## Monday in the Third Week of Easter

### Reading

*Acts 6:8-15 (RSV)*

#### *The Arrest of Stephen*

**STEPHEN**, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyre'nians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cili'cia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men, who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup> and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law; <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us." <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

### Reflection

**WE READ** the Acts of the Apostles during Eastertide with a keen sense of the excitement and joy of the earliest Christian community. Yet quite early on we meet some of the crises that young community experienced. One of these is the story of the shiny new deacon, Stephen, one of seven appointed to look after the day to day life of the church ('to serve tables' is the phrase). No sooner than Stephen is appointed (Acts 6:5), he is arrested and put on trial. He is an eloquent preacher, as we hear in Acts 7, but by the end of the chapter he is stoned to death.

There are some versions of Christianity where life is presented as a kind of enchanted garden, where nothing goes wrong, and everyone is kept happy and safe. In their extreme form, these versions offer material prosperity, and many an American pastor has built a luxury life-style on this model. These versions are not the ones we find in the New Testament or in the history of the Church. Often God's faithful people experience suffering and setbacks. We have been reminded of this not least by our recent difficulties.

Yet, as William Cowper's hymn reminds us, 'Behind a frowning Providence/ [God] hides a smiling face'. There is a complex relationship between a General Providence and Particular Providence. The one is about how a loving God has ordered all things. The other is about how you and I experience him amidst the ups and downs of my life. So, in the great scheme of things, we are alive on the one planet in a remote corner of the universe which can sustain life. We are surrounded by beauty and our lives are graced by love and kindness. We are adopted by God as his children and invited to live with him for ever in the Eternal Life of the Resurrection. That is how 'General Providence' works. As for Particular Providence, this is much more mysterious. As I look back on my life, I can easily count my blessings but I can't begin to figure out how they work. It's even harder when I try to look at others' lives. Particular is certainly particular!

So, the story of Stephen brings us up short both after Christmas – Boxing Day is St Stephen's Day and we suddenly put on red vestments – and now soon after Easter. The Early Church is a remarkable phenomenon – the way things so quickly spread – but, without the stories of adversity, without the martyrdoms, it would seem like an enchanted garden. The two lines of 'God moves in a mysterious way' which precede those quoted earlier gives us this salutary warning: 'Judge not the Lord by feeble sense/ But trust Him for His grace'.

## **Tuesday in the Third Week of Easter**

**20<sup>th</sup> April**

**Reading**

*Acts 7:51 – 8:1 (RSV)*

*The Stoning of Stephen*

[Stephen said to the people, the elders, and the scribes:] <sup>51</sup> 'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the

coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.'

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. <sup>55</sup> 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; <sup>56</sup> and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.' <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. <sup>58</sup> 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. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' <sup>60</sup> And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samar'ia, except the apostles.

## Reflection

**YESTERDAY** we looked at the first part of the story of Stephen and today we look at the second part. The psalm links the murder of Stephen and the crucifixion of Christ by including the verse that St Luke tells us that Jesus prayed on the Cross - 'Into your hand I commit my spirit'. That verse is echoed by the serene words of Stephen: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Many times, in the history of the martyrs, we discover something like the story of Stephen. Not only the commending of the soul but also the vision of glory: Stephen 'full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.'

One of the earliest accounts of martyrdom, following Christ's Passion and Stephen's stoning, is the martyrdom of St Polycarp (23<sup>rd</sup> February in the Calendar). Polycarp was 86 when he was put to death by burning (AD 155) but in the account from the Church in Smyrna we learn not only of his serene self-offering but that the body in the midst of the fire 'did not appear like burning flesh, but rather...like bread being baked, or like gold and silver being refined in a furnace.' There was the fragrant smell as if of frankincense. A generation after Polycarp, Tertullian (AD 197) famously echoes the wheat metaphor 'We multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christians is seed,' a saying which nowadays is more loosely translated as 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'.

We used to think that the days of martyrdom were over. In his 1964 homily canonizing the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ugandan Martyrs, Pope St Paul VI remarked 'Whoever would have thought that [accounts of ancient African martyrs] would be followed today by new accounts of deeds no less brave and no less glorious?' Sadly, what the Pope called 'a free and independent Africa' was overshadowed by the atrocities of Idi Amin's Uganda in the following decade. Martyrdom is a current topic as well as a matter of history.

Most Christians' lives, thankfully, don't lead to a martyr's death, though our discomforts, our pain, and our suffering can be offered up and united with the suffering of Christ on the Cross. As St Paul said to the Colossians (1:24), 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church'. Since the rise of monasticism in the fourth century, the Church has known and valued that martyrdom – bearing witness – is more often a feature of holy lives, lived to the glory of God and in service of others, than an untimely end.

## **Wednesday in the Third Week of Easter**

### **Reading**

*Acts 8:1-8 (RSV)*

#### *Saul Persecutes the Church*

And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samar'ia, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

#### *Philip Preaches in Samaria*

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to a city of Samar'ia, and proclaimed to them the Christ. <sup>6</sup> And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was much joy in that city.

## Reflection

**THE DEATH** of Stephen marks the end of the Jerusalem story. We are moving now on to the wider stage – with Saul the Pharisee, consenting to Stephen’s stoning, soon transitioning to Paul the Preacher, but at this point actively persecuting believers. As the Church in Judaea is scattered by the effects of persecution, so new initiatives spring up, one of which is the preaching of Philip in Samaria. We are obliged to ponder the mismatch between what the deacons were created to do – the service of the needy, freeing the apostles to range over a wider area, preaching the Gospel – and what they ended up doing. The deacon Stephen proves himself an effective preacher, a truly Christ-like, apostolic figure who shares in the death of his Lord. The deacon Philip, far from looking after the local needy, goes off to Samaria where he engages in work which we can only describe as also apostolic. There are different theories around about the early deacons. One is that what St Luke calls ‘deacons’ we should call ‘priests’, that is people who share in the task of ‘apostle’ (i.e. bishop) as deputies and extend locally the oversight of the Church, exercised from various centres. Whatever we make of the ministry of a deacon, it is clearly the ministry of someone who serves (*diakonos* means ‘servant’) and in that sense reminds us of, and expresses, the life and work of Christ, the Suffering Servant.

## Thursday in the Third Week of Easter

### Reading

*John 6:44-51 (RSV)*

*The Living Bread come down from heaven*

Jesus said to the crowd: <sup>44</sup> No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. <sup>46</sup> Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup> This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.

## Reflection

**WATCHING** the early development of the Christian Church in the Acts of the Apostles is fascinating. Today we pause to look at the Gospel. The Gospel passages this week are extracts from John 6, an encounter with Jesus' teaching about the Bread from Heaven. This, says Jesus, is 'the bread of God...which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (*John 6:33*). It was not Moses who (past tense) **gave** this bread, but the Father who (present tense) **gives** the true bread from heaven. The chapter began with the Feeding of the Five Thousand on the far side of the Sea of Galilee and continues with Jesus, back in Capernaum, teaching that 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (6:53). This doctrine sounded a bit like cannibalism to its first audience and often arouses hostility and incredulity whenever it is first encountered nowadays. For Jews, blood is life-blood, ritually drained out of animals before they are cooked and eaten, and drinking blood – especially human blood – is disgusting as well as in contravention of the Jewish Law. No wonder 'many of his disciples drew back and no longer walked with him' (6:66).

Catholics are content to take these words literally, but various attempts have been made to re-interpret the words figuratively, and even to say that Jesus is not talking about 'flesh' and 'blood' in a eucharistic sense. It is certainly true that we cannot simply equate 'flesh' with 'bread' and 'blood' with 'wine'. In Catholic teaching, the whole Christ – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – is present in both eucharistic species. We may see and taste what looks and tastes like bread and wine – just as many who looked at Jesus saw just the human Jesus. But, just as the eye of faith sees beyond to Christ the Son of God, so we look beyond the appearance of bread and wine to Christ's Divine Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Believing in the One who is the Bread of Life, says the Fourth Gospel (6:47), is the gateway to eternal life. Abiding in Jesus is the response and reward for Jesus abiding in us (6:56). It is the Spirit that gives life (6:63). No one can come to Jesus 'unless it is granted him by the Father' (6:65). We have no where else to turn, as Simon Peter says to Jesus, for Jesus has 'the words of eternal life' (6:68). We find ourselves saying with Peter, 'we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God', that is, the Messiah, the Christ. (6:69)

## Friday in the Third Week of Easter

### Reading

*Acts 9:1-20 (RSV)*

#### *The Pharisee Saul is converted on the Damascus Road*

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. <sup>4</sup> And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' <sup>5</sup> And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; <sup>6</sup> but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Anani'as. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Anani'as.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, 'Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen a man named Anani'as come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' <sup>13</sup> But Anani'as answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name.' <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; <sup>16</sup> for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' <sup>17</sup> So Anani'as departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and took food and was strengthened.

For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus. <sup>20</sup> And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'

## Reflection

### *The Conversion of St Paul*

**THE CONVERSION** of St Paul, described in Acts 9, is a pivotal moment in the spread of Christianity. In the Calendar, as revised in 1970, we don't meet all the saints as once we did, which makes our encounter with the saints on weekdays – as in today's reading – particularly worth noticing.

The most famous conversion story not only in the Bible but in the whole of Christian history, gives us a proper example of what it is to turn to Christ. It isn't just an awakening of a dormant faith, as when someone who has been baptised but never practised, still less the story of a journey from a separated Christian community into the Catholic Church. Saul the Pharisee was persecuting Christians, seeking to imprison them and endanger their lives. He became Paul the Apostle, arguably the most influential Christian theologian of all. He remains a controversial figure, not quite fitting in with some of our ideas. For liberal Protestants, he has sometimes been seen as the one who hijacked the Jesus of the Gospels and turned him into someone else. That's an extreme view – and, of course, wrong – but it does remind us how much of our understanding of the nature and person of Christ owes to the Epistles of St Paul. At the other end, we have, in the Catholic Church, Paul presented as the second most important apostle of all. Buried in the basilica 'outside the walls' of Rome, he ranks with St Peter, buried under the square of St Peter's. The Roman Church is the Church of St Peter and St Paul, and the First Eucharistic Prayer, the Roman Canon, lists Paul after Peter in the list of apostles. Poor old Matthias, who is brought into the Twelve to replace Judas, is relegated, it seems, to the second list, later in the prayer.

St Paul, who calls himself the least of the apostles, 'unfit to be called an apostle, because [he]persecuted the church of God' (1 Corinthians 15:9), is ranked as an apostle because he was a witness of the Risen Christ. Having said that, the Christ whom he met on the Damascus Road, was the Ascended and Glorified Christ. It was a vision and not an encounter, such as the apostles had on the evening of Easter Day and the following Sunday.