

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Dec 26th 2015

Feast of Saint Stephen, first martyr

On December the 26th we celebrate the Feast of Saint Stephen, the first martyr. He was one of the original deacons in Jerusalem. Several years ago the candidates who were studying to become deacons decided that we would give a gift each December 26th to the Immaculata Monastery in Norfolk, Nebraska, for graciously hosting our monthly diaconate formation sessions. The sisters at this Benedictine monastery are so joy-filled and hospitable. They pray for us and set such a great example of dedication to Jesus. We chose this day because it is mid-way through the formation year and also because Saint Stephen was a deacon. We discussed what gift would be appropriate and decided upon a cake. Coming from a Franciscan background, I told the story of the Benedictines wanting to give the Portiuncula, the first church of the Franciscans, to Saint Francis but he insisted on renting it instead. The rental amount was a basket of fish each year. Knowing the sisters, we agreed that they would choose cake over fish any day. Thus, a tradition began.

It is actually quite ironic that the Church has us celebrate the first martyr on the day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christmas is a warm and wonderful time. Gifts are exchanged, meals are eaten, and some actually celebrate the incarnation of he who is God from God, light from light, true God from true God. Yet, on the second day of Christmas we are reminded that belief in that baby who was born in the manger can get you killed. However, it is the Feast of Saint Stephen so what better way to celebrate it than to eat cake?

Sometimes I wonder if government officials along with the people they represent are blind to what is happening around the world. Christians are being martyred at an alarming rate. More Christians die every day than in any previous time since that baby was born in a manger and Saint Stephen was stoned to death. They are being crucified, drowned, burned to death, shot, and beheaded. They have to flee their own homes simply because they believe in Jesus. And this news of Christian persecution around the world is largely ignored. It is as if we have become anesthetized to the murder of Christians. The “civilized” world could surely do something about this, if we wanted to.

On the other hand, as one of my friends is known to say, “Why should today be different?” Jesus said it would be this way. Listen to his words from the Gospel reading:

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.”

Saint Stephen endured to the end. How many of our Middle Eastern brothers and sisters are doing the same? So, I would like for our world to do something about this and stop the Christian genocide. Yet, these same suffering servants of God inspire me to strive to be like them and endure to the end. Knowing that this endurance is possible because of the power of God who is greater than those who would kill us, we celebrate. We have feasts. We eat cake.

George Butterfield - Creighton University's Law School Library