

5 EASTER MAY 22, 2011 CYCLE "A"

**TITLE: IN THE FATHER'S HOUSE THERE'S ROOM FOR YOU
AND ME**

READINGS: Acts 7:55-60, Ps.31:1-5,15-16, 1Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

The theme running through today's readings is one of witnessing our faith, our belief in Jesus as the way to the Father and our commitment to the fact that all who believe in Jesus can be assured of not only finding the way but of receiving a place in the father's Kingdom. Our first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles really focuses on what a witness is and the consequences of being a fully committed witness. You might be interested to know that the word *martyr* in English is a transliteration of the Greek word for "witness". The original meaning really had nothing to do with death and dying. Originally it referred to a person who stood in a courtroom to testify as an eye-witness or to one who stood in the Market Place to witness his understanding of the truth. The connotation of *martyr* as one who died for his/her faith did not appear until the second or third centuries.

The most common and better known witnesses of faith today are our Pastors, Missionaries and Preachers of the Word of God who witness Jesus Christ. Once there was a preacher who stopped in the middle of his sermon and signaled to the usher. "In the second row," he whispered, "is a man who is sound asleep. Wake him up." "That's not fair," said the usher. "What do you mean, 'not fair', the preacher asked. "You put him to sleep; you wake him up!" said the usher. And once there was a pastor who came to church with a band aid stuck to his face. At the end of his rather lengthy sermon he explained, "While I was shaving this morning I was thinking about my sermon and I cut my face." A voice from the congregation was heard, "Next time, pastor, think about your face and cut your sermon."

We are introduced to Stephen in our first reading. He was the very first witness to Jesus Christ who died because of his faith. He would most certainly not be the last. Luke molds this story along the contours of Jesus' own death. Both occur outside the city of Jerusalem and the words of Stephen are very similar to those of Jesus on the cross. "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit,' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died." Acts 7:59-60. It takes us right back to Jesus' words as he hung dying on the cross, "Into your hands, O Lord, I

commend my spirit,” and “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:46 and 23:34).

This story of Stephen’s Martyrdom begins the great movement of witnesses of Jesus moving away from Jerusalem and traveling throughout the world, especially toward Rome to bring the Good News. It also introduces to the Gospel story the person of Saul who steps forward to become the great persecutor of Christians. For Luke tells us just in the next verse which begins chapter 8 of Acts, “That day severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem...and, “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” Acts 8:1,3. Following Jesus, says Luke takes commitment in faith, in love, in the total gift of ourselves and not only being willing to suffer persecution but even death for the sake of salvation, not only for ourselves but also for the body of Christ, the church. We note the long history of the thousands of martyrs from Stephen to our own day.

It is in Peter’s letter today that we receive the reassurance that we have committed ourselves truly to God the Father through his son Jesus. For Peter makes it clear that those who accept the obligation of a Christian to become a witness, have received a special calling and God’s grace to carry it out. For he assures us that, “You are a royal priesthood and holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” 1Pet.2:9. It is evident that we baptized, committed Christians are called to witness to these things, to proclaim the call of Jesus, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of everyone else. We are the church we are his body carrying out the work and witness of Christ today.

It is in our Gospel pericope that we receive the confidence and assurance from the Lord himself. Even though we hear this passage of John 14 so much at funeral and memorial services it is truly an Easter proclamation. We Christians profess that we look forward to and celebrate the new life promised by the Lord Jesus in which we have already begun to participate through baptism. If there is any incentive to Christian work and witness in the world it should be this – we have a guaranteed place in God’s plan of salvation, both in this world and in the world to come. We know God has prepared for us a city; we have a place. We do not have to earn a place in history, because we already have a place in the heart of God. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Jn.14:2. We know and are confident in our faith that in the Father’s house there is certainly room for you and me.

Jesus promises the power appropriate for our Christian life. “If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.” Jn.14:14. We do not operate on our own in the place Christ has prepared for us. We do not walk down that road of faith unaccompanied. Just like Stephen, Phillip, Peter and the other disciples we do not travel alone. We, too, go equipped with the power of his name, armed with the power of his love. Whenever we witness, whenever we do the work of Christ, whenever we stand against the forces of injustice and intolerance, we are doing the work of Christ Jesus. Thank God for Stephen and Peter and John and Phillip and Thomas and Paul and for all those other witnesses and Martyrs who walked in the footsteps of Christ and paved the way for us! **Amen.**

Pastor Barney

Addendum: George Barna, a church-growth specialist, asked a group of pastors how they believed Christ would rate their church if he were to return today. Fifty-three percent of those pastors said Christ would rate their church as having little or no positive impact on souls or society. How sad, How very sad! Wouldn't it be great if we could see concrete evidence that our community is a better community and our town is a better town because this church had carried out its call of witness to Jesus Christ?