

"Seeing Jesus in the Clouds" - Easter.5.A.2023.05.07.Sermon (Acts 7:55-58) A. Cottrill

"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. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him." This is our text. Let us pray: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen"

Today we celebrate St. Stephen proto-martyr, the first adult to die for his faith in Jesus Christ in the book of Acts. We don't celebrate it because we want to see Christians killed, but rather in Stephen we see the courage of a person who understand that the kingdom of God is eternal and making a sacrifice for it is not in vain. One martyr of the 20th century Jim Elliot said 'he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose'. That was Stephen's mindset.

In one sense, Stephen wasn't even supposed to be preaching, he was supposed to make sure the widows in the church were taken care of and so they made him a deacon. But there's a funny thing about people who love Jesus, it's hard to get them to shut up about him. You may have friends who won't stop talking about the Toronto Maple Leafs or their home renovations, well St. Stephen, was like that except with Jesus. He never stopped talking about Jesus. And he wants people to understand quite clearly that Jesus is the whole point of the Old Testament, that that's what it was all leading up to.

The Jewish authorities don't like this. They killed Jesus, and they just want him to be forgotten, like all the other revolutionaries and radical preachers who had been silenced. But the risen and ascended Jesus keeps speaking through his apostles and prophets and deacons. In fact Jesus is still speaking to you today, here and now.

We need him to. Because in the same way that the crowds shouted down Stephen's preaching, we drown out the gospel in our lives. We listen to music, podcasts, television,

movies, sports, anything to distract or entertain us. And at best we tend to devote a few hours a week to God. How are we being called today to repent of our lifestyle? Are we diet Christians, who cut out as much Jesus as we can like he's sugar, salt, or cholesterol.

Or is our life seasoned with Jesus? Does he come up in our conversations at home? Do we thank him regularly and often for saving us from our sins, and for giving us his holy word and sacraments? I remember having a friend from Ghana in Africa named Felix - it's funny his name meant 'happy one' and he always was happy. And it didn't matter if it was sunny or raining, hot or cold, whenever you greeted Felix and said 'how are you doing?' his answer was always 'still praising'.

Stephen is given a hard calling, one that ultimately kills him, and Jesus gave it to him. And even when they pick up rocks to throw at him, St. Stephen is happy like Felix, he's still praising. Because he knows he's doing what Jesus called him to. What calling has Jesus given you? Are you a parent, a worker, a husband, wife, or a child? Where has God put you, and does it feel like the job is gonna kill you? It might, but that's where Jesus put you.

I think of the police officer we lost this year in Hagersville, or as we celebrated King Charles' coronation I think of Elizabeth the second who died in office. Many people don't get to retire. And even when folks do so, Jesus still has jobs for them to do, and some of those jobs are hard work. But even in the midst of his hard work, even as he suffered, Stephen looked up to the clouds and saw Jesus. Do we acknowledge that the jobs God has given to us, are a part of our calling? Can we look up from filing taxes or cutting grass, or cooking dinner and see that even there in the everyday God is smiling down on us. Jesus is watching on with pleasure in you his children who are doing exactly the task he has given to you.

The peace of being a Christian is that we can work at Tim Hortons, or we can wash dishes in a church basement, or we can change a baby's diaper, and in all these tasks we can know that God has called us and we are being faithful. We should celebrate with joy those moments where God's Spirit helps us to obey. As one pastor said 'celebrate obedience, not perceived success'. God has not called us to be successful, he has called us to be faithful. So as Christians we can say with peace in our hearts - Lord my life is yours, I am your baptized child, and you can do whatever you like with my life. And if this is what God has chosen to use me for, then great. I freely give it.

And when we do that, we will see Jesus in all sorts of ways. I have been a deli-worker, slicing bologna and explaining the gospel to a coworker who asked what I believed. I have sold suits to grieving people and helped them honour their parents and loved ones in a manner befitting a Christian. I have been a Teaching Assistant, approached by an exuberant student who said 'Sir, you're the only TA I have who doesn't hate the Lord and his church'. In all sorts of ways God has used me, and in all sorts of ways God has used you too. And if not, it starts today. In all sorts of ways the clouds of life are lined with the smiling favour of Jesus.

Today as we see Jesus in what looks like bread and wine, we can also have peace. We can know that here at this altar is where Christ called us to be. We can take his body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins and be strengthened in our faith. And tomorrow we will go on to fight that battle as well. And each day, we can look up to the clouds and remember that we are where Jesus put us. We can rest in his good pleasure. And one day we will know why we were chosen for this or that. One day the tapestry will be revealed.

I've included the picture today because it's a common illustration preachers have used to

explain the providence of God. If you look at the back of the tapestry, it is hideous. It barely looks like anything. And this might be what it feels like to be carrying out your calling. You may say: Lord how does shoveling my sidewalk or doing the laundry or filing a report glorify you. And we are only looking at one side. One day, we will be in Heaven, with Jesus and St. Stephen, and there we will see the other side of the tapestry. We will know why God called us where we are. And so until that day, may we be strengthened by Christ, the saviour who died that we might live forever, the one who forgives us all our sins. As we have received his word, so may we take his sacrament now, in faith.

In the name of Jesus: Amen.