

STS General Chapter Retreat
Vespers 9-24-19 Acts 7:54-8:4, Mark 13:28-37
Rev. Jay Denne, STS

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was supposed to be a Bishop here to proclaim the Gospel to us this evening, but scheduling conflicts prevented the Bishop from attending. To fill in for the Bishop, you are stuck with someone else who has a title that begins with “B”.

Bursar. You’re stuck with the Bursar. I promise you there will be no budgets, financial reports, or numbers in this sermon. Thanks be to God.

Actually, to reflect on this evening’s reading from Acts, I want to borrow a tradition from another thing that begins with “B”. Benedictine. If I’m connected with you online, you might remember that I am a fan of the Benedictine tradition, and my Twitter ID is even the “Benedictine Lutheran” - I’ve been trained as a spiritual director by Benedictine sisters, and I spend time as an Associate in the Monastic Center of New Melleray Abbey- which is a Trappist monastery, but they are in the Benedictine family tree, so close enough.

However, I admit that I’m not a real Benedictine Lutheran – here at our General Chapter Retreat, we are always blessed by brothers from St. Augustine’s, and this year, as you know, our teaching theologian is the one who wrote the book on what it means to be a Benedictine Lutheran, Maxwell Johnson.

What tradition from the Rule of St. Benedict am I going to borrow from, though?

I’m talking about the tradition from Chapter 36 of Benedict’s Rule of reading from one of the fathers or mothers of the church while at the table.

Our mealtime gatherings here aren't very conducive to such a reading, so I'm going to do it here at Vespers before our evening meal, but it is ancient and venerable practice which I commend to your chapters, particularly during your Lenten retreats. It is consistent with the Rule of our Society, Chapter Six, Paragraph 3, which states that during our time of study and reflection, we "will make use of the Councils, Fathers, and Doctors of the Church, and the Sixteenth Century Reformers and their Confessions." And of course, our Rule also speaks of mutual consolation and encouragement of each other. I can think of no greater consolation and encouragement than those words which proclaim Christ that were once spoken by the saints who have gone before us and are now a part of the great cloud of witnesses.

So, as we look forward to eating a meal together in a few minutes, hear these words which are an excerpt from a sermon given by Martin Luther on St. Stephen's Day, followed by a few additional words from me – you might remember that in another life I am an attorney, and one of the many sins of lawyers is that we always like to get in the last word. *Mea culpa. Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa.*

Anyway, about St. Stephen, Luther proclaimed:

"When God desires to reveal himself, heaven and everything else requisite are near. It matters not whether Stephen were beneath a roof or in the open air, heaven was near to him. Abnormal vision was not necessary.

God is everywhere; there is no need that he come down from heaven. A vision, at close range, of God actually in heaven is easily possible without the quickening or perverting of the senses. It matters not whether or not we fully comprehend how such a vision is effected.

It is not intended that the wonders of God be brought within our grasp; they are manifested to induce in us belief and confidence. Explain to me, ye of boasted wisdom, how the comparatively large apple or pear or

cherry can be grown through the tiny stem; or even explain less mysterious things. But permit God to work; believe in his wonders and do not presume to bring him within your comprehension.

Who can number the virtues illustrated in Stephen's example? There loom up all the fruits of the Spirit.

We find love, faith, patience, benevolence, peace, meekness, wisdom, truth, simplicity, strength, consolation, philanthropy. We see there also hatred and censure for all forms of evil. We note a disposition not to value worldly advantage nor to dread the terrors of death. Liberty, tranquility and all the noble virtues and graces are in evidence. There is no virtue but is illustrated in this example; no vice it does not rebuke.

Well may the evangelist say Stephen was full of faith and power. Power here implies activity. Luke would say, "His faith was great; hence his many and mighty works." For when faith truly exists, its fruits must follow. The greater the faith, the more abundant its fruits.

True faith is a strong, active and efficacious principle. Nothing is impossible to it. It rests not nor hesitates. Stephen, because of the superior activity of his faith, performed not merely ordinary works, but wrought wonders and signs publicly — great wonders and signs, as Luke says. This is written for a sign that the inactive individual lacks in faith, and has no right to boast of having it. Not undesignedly is the word "faith" placed before the word "power." The intention was to show that works are evidence of faith, and that without faith nothing good can be accomplished.

Faith must be primary in every act. To this end may God assist us. Amen."¹

¹ Accessed online at http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/129luther_f9.htm.

Those words from Luther remind us that without faith, Stephen could do nothing, but with faith, Stephen beheld the glory of God.

Did the faith that led him to behold the glory of God also lead him to experience what we humans would lift up as a time of great strength, triumph, or glory? Having an angry mob come at you with gritted teeth and then stone you to death doesn't sound like strength, triumph, or glory to me.

But, so it is with the kingdom of God. Strength can be revealed through weakness. Triumph can be revealed through suffering. Glory can be revealed through death, even death on a cross.

We cannot see that kind of God's glory on our own. We can only see it through faith – again as Luther said, “faith must be primary in every human act. To this end may God assist us.”

The last verse of this evening's reading from Acts also gives us a glimpse of how God's glory can shine even in the aftermath of something as brutal and shocking as a death by stoning “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”

They had seen their Lord crucified, raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and then they had received the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost, but the grim specter of persecution and death still followed them due to the work of people like Saul, who had not yet had the scales of hatred and violence fall away from his eyes.

Our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world know that specter of persecution and death firsthand. The Coptic martyrs in Egypt, those killed by bombings in Sri Lanka, and the list could go on and on.

Nevertheless, through the power of the Holy Spirit, those first Christians persisted, even thrived, in the midst of those persecutions. Those who were scattered did not quit.

They took those words of urgency we heard this evening from our Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospel of Mark quite seriously – there was no time to waste. Their persistence led to the faith being spread throughout the ends of the Earth, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

But that kind of persistence is no ordinary human work. It is a work that is only possible through faith, which must be “primary in every human act. To this end may God assist us.”

Here in North America, we are faced with a different predicament, but we are certainly being scattered right before our very eyes. I’ll keep my promise that I won’t throw numbers at you, and you’re probably familiar with those kinds of statistics anyway. There is a predicament of unbelief. A predicament of hostility to the Church. And perhaps worst of all, a predicament of apathy, indifference, and even acedia, as our Senior mentioned in his address earlier this afternoon.

The witness of Stephen, who beheld the glory of God even as he was dying, the persistence of those scattered early Christians in spreading the faith, and the words of Martin Luther all point to same thing. Where there is unbelief around us and within us, God is still faithful to his promises – speaking to us through the Word, renewing and nourishing us through the sacraments. Where there is hostility, God the Father still reigns through Jesus Christ, his only son our Lord. Where there is apathy and indifference, God still abounds in steadfast love through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.

Life in the face of unbelief, hostility, indifference and apathy, and even life in the face of death itself.

My sisters and brothers of this Society, and our friends with whom we are blessed to have with us at this General Chapter Retreat – the task set before us is not easy. Some days, if you’re like me, we perhaps don’t know how much more scattering we can take.

But as the Rule of St. Benedict states, never despair of God's mercy, and as the Rule of our Society states in Chapter 2, be prepared to confess Christ before the world and to give testimony to the hope that is in us.

A hope given to us through faith.

Again, as Luther said, a kind of faith that is "primary in every human act. To this end may God assist us. Amen."