

Preach the Gospel at all times

April 13, 2008

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with this statement: *Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.* That's a rather astonishing thing to say....."Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary use words.".....and it's a remark which has to leave one questioning just what he meant. Questioning that is, until we consider Stephen, deacon and martyr, the personification of the determination of the Lord's disciples to develop universal outreach. I want to move ahead of the Lectionary reading for today in the Book of Acts and consider Stephen and his world (Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60).

From the time of Alexander the Great's conquest of Palestine and western Asia, there had been a strong Greek influence in Judea and Galilee. The scriptures had been translated into Greek. In various areas of the Jewish dispersion Greek had become the spoken language. It's not clear whether the *Hellenists*

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mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles were Greek speaking Jews from abroad who had come to Judea, or native Palestinians who had embraced the Greek culture. What is clear is that a good number of such Hellenists had been brought into the Christian community. When these people found that their widows and disabled members were sometimes neglected in the distribution of Christian poor relief, they asked for representation in the management of such funds. To this the Apostles readily agreed. And as we read in Acts, seven men from among the Hellenists, all bearing Greek names, were put forward. Following the pattern by which Rabbis were ordained, the Apostles prayed and laid their hands on these men to set them apart for service to their faction of the Church.

Stephen was seen as the most energetic and effective among them. He was the preacher and debater in defense of his new - found faith. He showed little tact

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and like some of the earlier prophets, he described the nation's history as one of unrelieved rebellion against God. Stephen declared that the people consistently resisted God's Holy Spirit; that earlier generations had persecuted every one of the prophets and that the nation had never kept the law that it had received.

His deeds attracted as much attention as his words. Stephen had demonstrated the power of the Gospel by performing "wonders and signs" among the people.

Stephen's bold message before the High Priest and the Council, was more than merely memorable.....it set Jerusalem on fire! After this sermon and the subsequent murder of Stephen, the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, even though professing to be faithful Jews, and followers of the basic Mosaic Law were no longer safe. They could no longer *blend in*, but now had taken on a definition of their own. The *new wine* could no longer be contained in the *old wineskins*.

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The sudden tragedy of the stoning of Stephen had far reaching effects and a storm of persecution began against the Church in Jerusalem. The evangelist, Philip, moved into Samaria and was followed by Peter and John. Mark, according to tradition, left to evangelize Egypt. The disciple Thomas went to evangelize India. The Christian dispersion had begun. It might never had spread as it did but for Stephen's dying witness for his faith.

The stand Stephen took was sacramental. Nothing less than his own life was on the line in the telling of the truth that had literally grasped him in the core of his being. He was wholly transparent to God's reality being expressed through him. The medium and the message coincided completely. Stephen was willing to leave his *comfort zone* and to confront others to leave theirs, whatever the cost. His message was prophetic in its truest sense because in him the holiness of God burst forth at the risk of his own life, and in this act,

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the cultural elite were confronted with what John Wesley called *social holiness*.

Why is it that the preaching of *social holiness* always seems to stir up the wrath of those who hold the aces in the cultural card game? Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the boldest proponents of *social holiness* in the lifetime of many of us, wasn't killed for being a **dreamer**, but for being a **doer**. The prophetic call **to do** which Stephen presented to the council, and which King presented to segregated America brings our focus to this central fact: the aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of **loving, doing** persons. Stephen's and Martin's words and actions brought them death; their words and actions also brought them eternity.

One does have to wonder about the effect of Stephen on Saul, the impassioned lieutenant of orthodoxy who stood silently by and watched the stoning of Stephen.

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What did it do to Saul when he witnessed Stephen's death with not so much as a fist being raised in defiance, no curse passing through his lips, but seeing him kneel and asking God not to hold the sin against them who were taking his life? The memory of such a horrifying, brutal death must have weighed upon him as he pondered a power of love he had never seen before. The truth of the matter is he didn't know how to deal with it and went on a binge of persecution after Stephen's death in Jerusalem and asked permission to investigate *followers of the Way* in the synagogues of Damascus with the idea of bringing them to Jerusalem for arraignment and justice.

We may thank God he never would complete that mission. One has to wonder, too, if Saul, lying blinded in the home of Ananias, must have made some sort of connection between the light in Stephen's dying face and the light of Jesus that blinded him on the road to Damascus. I suspect he must have, because

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the world and Saul, or Paul, as we know him, ever since this divine illumination have never been the same.

AMEN.