We ended yesterday’s reflection with Stephen brought to trial before the Sanhedrin by diaspora Jews. At his trial, Stephen makes, what we now call, the lengthiest single discourse in Acts. It is all together 51 verses. At a weekday Mass we simply do not have the time to deal with it in depth or detail.

Let me only say this, that

* This speech really Luke’s way of putting Stephen’s speech together but Luke’s key to interpreting his two volume writings – Luke and Acts.
* In reality, Stephen’s speech, which was also his defense against the accusations made against him, does not address the concern of his accusers. What Luke is really is doing is employing the method of a Hellenistic historian – defending claims by recounting “ancestral tradition.”
* In this speech Luke has made clear his precise understanding of Israel’s past. He is engaging in apologetics. In fact, we have the first Christian apologetics
* Here we have an idea of how kerygma developed further. If you compare Peter’s speech with Stephen’s speech, we see how Stephen/Luke built on what Peter initially preached after Pentecost. Again, all this will become important material for further Christian writings whether is it the gospels or the writing of the early Christian Fathers.
* This speech gives an indication of how early Christians understood Judaism. For the first time we have an idea of how early Christians looked at themselves the continuation and yet the direction that God was leading God’s people.
* The main characters of Stephens speech are Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. Through Abraham, God was acting. Joseph was rejected by his own people. Joseph was only recognized at his second visitation. Moses becomes the most important figure in this speech. He represents both God’s fidelity, but also one who is rejected by the people.

Martyrdom was “Imitation of Christ.”

The events of Stephen’s martyrdom imitate the sequence of Jesus Passion

* The confrontation with the religious authorities
* The agitation of the people
* The arrest
* The delivery to the Sanhedrin
* The trial
* The death

Stephens passion elements has elements of Jesus’ passion.

* As did Jesus, Stephen has grace and power (6:8)
* As did Jesus, Stephen worked signs and wonders among the people (6:8)
* As with Jesus He enters into dispute with those who challenge him (6:9; Lk 20:1-7), including those who are sent as spies (6:11; Lk 20:20).
* As with Jesus, Stephen is arrested (6:11; Lk 22:54) and brought to trial before the Sanhedrin (6:12-15; Lk 22:66-71)
* Stephen has false witnesses accuse him, (6:13). This element is missing in Luke’s passion narrative. However, it is found in other gospels (Mk 14:56; Mt 26:59).
* As with Jesus, he too is charged with blasphemy like Jesus was
* As with Jesus, he too is accused of speaking against the Temple
* As with Jesus, Stephen is taken out the city to be executed (7:58; Lk:23-32).
* At his death, there is the disposition of clothing (7:58; Luke 23:34) like they threw lots for Jesus’ clothes.
* As with Jesus, Stephen prays that his spirit be accepted (7:59; Lk 23:46).
* As with Jesus, Stephen asks forgiveness for his murderers (7:60; Lk 23:34)
* As with Jesus, Stephen is buried by pious people (8:2; Lk 23:50-55).

All this overlapping is meant to ensure that

* The community perceives Stephen as an authentic witness in continuity with Jesus. He is not one of the Twelve. But even if he was appointed by the 12 the same prophetic spirit that was active in him was active in Stephen.
* Even as he tells us the story of the martyrdom of Stephen, his focus remain on the Holy Spirit, who effects the prophetic movement in Stephen.
* This section will the story in Jerusalem. From now on, the movement will spread to the rest of the known world.
* For this transition, Luke introduces us to, who will become the primary shaker and mover of the early Christian Church – Saul.

Practical Implication

* First a social commentary – Those people who are crying persecution today in light of the stay-of-home order are making a joke out of what persecution and martyrdom. What we have now is not persecution, but a pandemic. You cannot pretend that a pandemic is persecution. Nobody is taking your religious freedom away. Nobody is asking you to stop preaching or to stop practicing. Nobody is coming to kill you for believing in Jesus. What we are being asked to do is stay at home so that you don’t end up killing people.
* Imitation of Christ – Thomas Kempis. If you want to imagine your life – think of it as “imitation of Christ.” Today, nobody is asking us to die for Christ. What I am asking us to do is “live for Christ.” Because unless you live for Christ, you cannot die for Christ! And you will not die for Christ, unless we live for him.

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