

# The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 7:55-60
<i>Response</i>	For thou, O Lord, art most high over all the earth
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 97:1-2, 66-7, 9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 17:20-26

The Seventh Sunday of Easter for Year C continues the Church's journey in the Easter season through the book of Acts. So we're going to start with the first reading, and here the Church gives us a very powerful, important passage for the first reading. It is the famous account of the Martyrdom of St. Stephen, who is the first Christian martyr, after the resurrection. You could say the first person martyred for the sake of Christ is John the Baptist, as the forerunner to Christ, but St. Stephen is the first martyr of the Church after the resurrection. So let's look at that and then we'll turn over to the gospel for today. Acts 7:55-60 says this:

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 upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so a few points to make about the martyrdom of St. Stephen. As we've seen in other Sundays for Easter, the reason the Church gives us readings from the Book of Acts is to show us, especially as we're preparing to celebrate the Feast of

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Pentecost, to show us the activity of the Holy Spirit in the early days of the Christian Church. And one of the main things that the Holy Spirit does in the Church in those first decades after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is send out evangelists, not just to proclaim the good news, but also to be witnesses to Christ. And the Greek word for witness is *martus*, where we get the word martyr from. So the Book of Acts actually begins in Acts 1 with Jesus saying to the disciples:

and you shall be my witnesses [*martyres*] in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samar'ia and to the end of the earth.

So in Acts 7, the account of Stephen's martyrdom, of his bearing witness to Christ even unto death, is a truly momentous event in the life of the early Church. And it's fitting that as we prepare for the Feast of Pentecost, which is going to be the coming of the Holy Spirit, that we would get this account of Stephen who was able to bear witness to Christ, even unto death. Why? Because he was"

full of the Holy Spirit.

So that's the first point I want to make. The second point I want to make here is that the reason for Stephen's execution is the same reason Christ is executed. It's the charge of blasphemy. In this case we don't actually hear them explicitly accuse Stephen of blasphemy. But nevertheless, that is the reason that they put him to death. And you can infer it from the Jewish context for two reasons. First, when Stephen says he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God, to be at the right hand of a king implies equality and equal authority with that king. So to place Jesus at the right hand of God is a confession of his equality with God, which if he were viewed as merely human, that would be a blasphemous statement. And that's why those who are standing around Stephen, when they hear him it says they:

stopped their ears

So they're trying to block out the blasphemous statement that he's making about Jesus by saying he's in Heaven and at the right hand of God. The second clue to the the reason they execute him for blasphemy is because of the manner of execution, which is that they stone him to death. So if you go back to Leviticus 24, it says that anyone who blasphemes the Lord will be stoned to death. So stoning is the particular method of execution that the Scripture prescribes for the execution of a blasphemer. Now you might think, "Well, wait. Why wasn't Jesus stoned if that's the case?" Well, in Jesus' day, what happened was he was a visible enough figure where the Sanhedrin had to figure out how to have him executed in keeping with

Roman Law. According to Roman Law, the Jewish leaders did not actually have the official capacity to pronounce capital punishment on anybody. But in this case, the execution of Stephen is not an official act of the Sanhedrin it's more of what we would call mob violence. So in the heat of the moment, in the moment of his blasphemy, the mob gathers, they're going to stone him to death, and then they're going to disperse. And as anyone who's familiar with occupational authority of figures, sometimes the government looks the other way when mob violence takes place or breaks out, and especially in a spontaneous situation. So that appears to be what's happened here with Stephen.

So like Christ, he is put to death as a blasphemer. And the other final thing about Stephen's martyrdom that is fascinating is that his martyrdom itself is actually configured to Christ in two ways. First, by the fact that he says of his executioners:

Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

So this is an echo. Anyone reading Acts would recall that in the Gospel of Luke, which remember is written by the same author as Acts, Jesus says:

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

So just as Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of his executioners, so Stephen prays for the forgiveness of his executioners. Secondly, in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus dies, he says:

Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!

He quotes Psalm 31, and then Stephen says something very similar, but he says:

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Okay, so there's a Christo-morphic character to Stephen's martyrdom. Stephen is, in a sense, a new Christ. He's being conformed to Christ as a *Christiano*, as a little Christ. Acts is the first book in which they were called Christians. He's being configured to Christ, not just in his life of proclaiming the good news and confessing the divinity of Jesus, but also in his death, in the very manner of his death, in the very words of his death.

So it's very fitting that in the season of Easter, as the Church is taking us on this journey through the Acts of the Apostles, that we would not just look at the evangelism of St. Peter or St. Paul. Well Paul, it's going to take him a minute, he has to get converted first. But in the first seven chapters, you have Peter and the early Jerusalem church. That climax is really with the martyrdom of Stephen. This is, in a sense, a centerpiece in the Book of Acts, where Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit, that's given a Pentecost, and configured to Christ in his death.

So that's the first reading for today's Mass. The bridge between not the old and the new, but between Acts and the Gospel here is Psalm 97, which is a Psalm that has as its main refrain:

The Lord is king over all the earth.

And one of the lines in the Psalm says that:

All people shall see his glory.

Now, if you're looking at the liturgy as a whole, it appears that this particular verse:

All people shall see is glory.

is the bridge between Acts and the gospel for today. Because what St. Stephen does, what leads to his execution, is that after he finishes his speech, he has a vision of Christ in glory, in Heaven, and in publicly confessing that he brings about his own death. He saw the Heavens open and the Christ standing at the right hand of God. So Stephen is given the gift of seeing the glory of Christ, or seeing the glory of the risen Christ, the ascended Christ, before his death. And then that is going to lay a foundation for the Gospel for today, in which Jesus himself at the last supper is going to talk about the vision of his glory, which is going to be one of the gifts that God gives to the Apostles, or that Christ asked the Father to give to his disciples.

So if you turn to the gospel for today, in the Easter Season the Church gives its privileged place to the Gospel of John. So even though we're in Year C, which is ordinarily dedicated during ordinary time to the Gospel of Luke, during the Easter season we continue to look at the words of Christ in the Gospel of John and

especially in his final great discourse in John 14-17, the last discourse of Jesus given to the disciples during the Last Supper. And in this text for today, it's beautiful that at the end of Easter, at the very end, we get the very last words of Jesus before his passion begins in John 18. That's the climax, the final verses of John 17, which is known as Jesus' high priestly prayer. It's called his high priestly prayer because a large part of the prayer is his active intercession. He's interceding for his Apostles and for the world in the same way that the Jewish high priest on the Day of Atonement would intercede for himself and for his priests and then for all the people of Israel. So in this case, the Church brings the Easter season to a close with Jesus's famous prayer for unity in John 17:20-26. So let's see what he says:

“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Okay. Whew. As you can tell, that's a dense prayer. There's a lot going on in Jesus' final prayer for unity. So what I want to do is just try to break it down and highlight a few key elements of that prayer. This is actually very instructive, whenever you're reading the Gospel of John, especially the words of Jesus, you just can't skim it. You can't read it quickly. You have to slow down and look at each word because every single word has meaning. Every single word is just rich and full of significance. So a few points about this final prayer. Number one, notice that the principle object, so to speak, of his prayer, the ones for whom Jesus is interceding, is what we might call the Apostolic Church. So if you go back to verses 6-19, Jesus prays for the Twelve Apostles. He prays for his apostles who are with him there at the Last Supper. But in the verses for the lectionary today, he shifts. He says:

I do not pray for these only [meaning the Twelve], but also for those who believe in me through their word.

So this is what I would refer to as the Apostolic Church. He's interceding for people who are going to come to believe in him through the word of the Twelve, through the proclamation of the gospel by the Apostolic College, by the Twelve Disciples. So that's the first point.

Second point, the principle subject of his prayer. What's the main thing he's praying for? It is unity. Verse 21:

that they may all be one.

This is very, very important. The last thing Jesus prays for on the very cusp of his passion...put yourself in his place, if you were about to be executed, what would you be praying for? If you knew that your hour had come, you're about to be put to death, you're going to pray for the thing that's most important to you. You're going to focus on what you consider most essential and Jesus' final prayer at the end of John 17, at the end of his discourse at Last Supper, is for unity in the Apostolic Church, is for the unity of those who believe in him through the Apostles.

It's very, very important to see that unity is not just something that — and we'll come back to this — that Christians should hope for or strive for. This is the heart of Christ. It's one of the deepest desires of his heart is that those who believe in him would be one. And what kind of unity is he describing here? It's the kind of unity that exists in the Trinity. So he prays

that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

So he prays for a supernatural unity amongst believers, that is modeled on the unity, the perfect unity of the Father and the Son himself. For what reason? Why does he want this unity? Why is this such a deep desire of his heart?

so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

So the unity, the perfect unity that Christ prays for his disciples, has as its goal the manifestation of the truth of the divinity of Jesus so that the world, when it looks at

the Church, it sees a unified Church and it can believe that the Father did indeed send the Son. Which of course implies that if there's this disunity in the Church, that's going to be a scandal. It's going to be a stumbling block to those outside the Church, who Jesus refers to here as the world, recognizing that Jesus is in fact the Eternal Son sent by the Father. So it's a very powerful point. Unity and the effectiveness of evangelization go together. One is a prerequisite for the other. In order for there to be the conversion of the world, you have to have unity in the Church that reflects the unity of the triune God.

Okay. Next point. It's not just unity, it's not just oneness, it's also the word glory. This is really important. Jesus says:

The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down. Wait a second. Wait, what? Jesus talked about the past tense here, "The glory," he says to the Father, "You gave me, I have given them." Not I will give them, I have given them. So what's he talking about here? This is actually called a *crux interpretum*. So this is an interpretive crux that is a difficulty. It's not exactly clear what he's referring to, so people have different opinions about it.

Because as you know, if you keep reading the Gospel of John, he's going to give them the Holy Spirit after the resurrection, when he breathes on them. But he hasn't done that yet. So what is the glory that he's already given to them? Well, there is a famous book on the priesthood of Christ by the French Catholic biblical scholar, Andre Feuillet, it's written back in the seventies. And Father Feuillet, in his book, *The Priesthood of Christ*. He argues and I think that this is probably correct, that this is a reference to the Eucharist. To the participation in his body and his blood that Christ has just given them at the Last Supper, because by everyone partaking of his flesh and partaking of his blood, the Eucharist not only symbolizes the unity, it actually affects that unity among the apostles themselves. So that the Eucharist is a participation in the glory of the word who has now become flesh. And doesn't just become flesh, but actually gives his flesh to his disciples in order that they might be one.

Anyway, that's a debated point. People can, people can have different views of it. Others might suggest that it might be through the grace of baptism that he's already given them. Because if you go back to John, Chapter 3, it suggests, although there's some debate about this as well, that Jesus only baptized his apostles, that he himself baptized them. And in some way you could argue that he's given grace. The grace of sharing in the divine life, through his unique act of baptizing them. But I suspect that in context here that this is probably a reference to what has just taken place at the Last Supper. Although John doesn't narrate the institution of the Eucharist, so you could argue against it that way. Anyway, it's a fascinating crux, but for our purposes here, Jesus' point, and if that is correct, and I think it's right, it would make sense that the Eucharist then is not just a participation in divine life of Christ.

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

I mean, that's all from the Gospel of John, it's just in chapter six, not in the Last Supper account. But it's the manner by which they are unified with one another because they all partake of the one body and the one cup as Paul will say later in his letter to the Corinthians. Anyway. So what Jesus says is:

The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.

And John Paul II will actually go on in his famous encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* to argue this very point that the church exists from the Eucharist. She receives her unity and her very existence from the Eucharist. So that the Eucharist is not just the source and summit of the Christian life.

It's also the principle of unity within the church itself. It manifests and affects that unity, which is why Eucharistic intercommunion as a goal of ecumenism is going to be one of the central issues. As long as there can't be intercommunion, we don't have full invisible unity between Christians. Because the Eucharist is that sign and sacrament of unity. Anyway, I'm going off down the road here. So I apologize. I don't mean to go off too quickly into tradition, but this is just a fascinating verse.

The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.

And here's the other clue that it's the Eucharist, the next verse:

I in them and thou in me.

So Jesus, when's the last time he talked about abiding in us and us abiding in him, John 6:

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

So there's the proof. There you go. No more debate. That's what's actually right. Okay. That makes sense. They're just within the level of the Joanine language here, he's describing the mutual indwelling that takes place as a result of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. So that they may be perfectly one. Why? Once again, Verse 23:

so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

So here we have unity. We have the Trinity, we have faith so that the world may believe, we have the emphasis on the glory of Jesus. Now we have an emphasis on love, Agape. So what Jesus also wants the world to know is not just the truth of the fact that he's the son, but also the love that was manifest through his incarnation and through the crucifixion. Very important. God never just goes for the intellect or the will. He goes for both. So he wants us to know the truth and to do the good. He wants the world to know that God sent and also to respond to the love of the Father by reciprocating, that love.

so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

Then he continues:

Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world.

Ah, so here we see what we will later refer to as the beatific vision. So Jesus' final prayer isn't just for there to be unity among his disciples and among those who are members of the apostolic church on earth. His ultimate prayer is for his apostles and those who believe through him, through them to be with him in the glory of his resurrected and glorified body after the Ascension. So he says:

I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. What does that mean before the foundation of the world? That's the divine glory of the preexistent eternal Son of God. So remember you have Christ is fully God and fully man. So the apostles can behold him in his humanity. That's one thing. But to behold him in the glory of his divinity is another thing. They get a glimpse of that, for example, on the mountain of transfiguration, which is not narrated in John, but it's in the Synoptics. In a sense, Christ pulls back the veil so they get a glimpse of the glory, of the glory that he had since the foundation of the world, meaning the glory that he has as the Eternal Son, the eternal uncreated Son of the Father.

Well, once Christ is crucified, dies and then rises again and ascends, he's going to ascend into Heaven. And there he will reign in glory and the glory of his united incarnate, divinity and humanity, and his desires that the apostles will be able to see that. That's what he's praying. He's praying for them to participate in the beatific vision, in effect.

O righteous Father,

he continues:

the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it

known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.

So his ultimate prayer here is for love. It's for agape. It's not just any kind of love. It's the triune love, the love of the triune God and the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father. He wants that Trinitarian love to be in the disciples so that he might be in them. So here we see this imagery of mutual indwelling and unity. And this goes back to earlier in the gospel, Jesus is going to say to the apostles, he's going to say:

If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

This kind of indwelling life of the most blessed Trinity. That's ultimately what Jesus desires for, not just for his disciples, but for everyone who believes in him through them and ultimately for the whole world, because as the catechism says, Paragraph 260, I think it is, "The ultimate end of the divine economy is the entry of God's creatures and to the blessed life of the holy Trinity." That's the whole reason it all exists is so that the creatures of God might be one with God in the glory of the most blessed Trinity. And that's Jesus' final prayer at the end of his great Last Supper discourse in the Gospel of John.

A beautiful way to end the Easter season, as we prepare for the coming of the agent of unity in the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The third person in the Trinity, who's going to make that manifest in a powerful way, in particular, on the Feast of Pentecost.

Alright. So in closing, I just would like to back up just a bit to the issue of unity in the church, because the verse we just read, John 17:21, that they might be one is the title of a very important, very powerful encyclical. One of my favorites, which is *Ut Unum Sint* by Pope John Paul II. *Ut unum sint* means "that they might be one." It's the Latin of John 17:21. And his encyclical on commitment to ecumenism. Now ecumenism, which is the active working for unity in the church is... It's a controversial subject, because a lot of people when they talk about ecumenism or who have had experiences of ecumenism might mean very different things by it. It's a word that can be used to describe things that reflect a unity in the church, which may not be exactly the kind of unity that the church herself means

when she speaks about the commitment to ecumenism. So I just would like to end. First of all, if you ever wondered about the ecumenical movement or if you wondered about the church's mission toward ecumenical unity, I cannot recommend highly enough that for an authentic understanding of it, you read John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* on ecumenism.

But just to give you a little taste of it, I'd like to end with a quote from St. John Paul II from that encyclical Paragraph 9, where he explicitly anchors the church's commitment to ecumenism in the final prayer of Jesus Christ. So this is what John Paul II writes:

Jesus himself at the hour of his passion prayed that they may all be one, John 17:21. This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his church and in which he wishes to embrace all people is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ's mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather it belongs to the very essence of this community. God wills the church because he wills unity and unity is an expression of the whole depth of his Agape, his love. In effect this unity bestowed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

And here's the key:

does not merely consist in the gathering of people as a collection of individuals. It is a unity constituted by the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments, and hierarchical communion.

All right, pause there. Notice there's false unity and there's an authentic unity. A false unity would just be a spirit of unity among individuals who gathered together and who tolerate one another. And have various things in common. That's not the kind of unity that Christ is praying for. And it's not the kind of unity the church speaks about when she talks about a commitment to ecumenism.

John Paul II lays it out. He's talking about three kinds of unity. Unity of faith. So unity in the profession of faith. Sacramental unity, so that's sacramental intercommunion. And then also hierarchical unity. That means communion with

---

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* no. 9

the established hierarchy of the apostles and their successors, the successor of the Bishop to St. Peter, the Bishop of Rome, as well as the successors to the other apostles. All three of those elements: faith, sacraments, and hierarchy are essential to authentic ecumenism and to the church's vision of what she means by unity in the church. John Paul continues:

Christ's words that they may be want are thus his prayer to the Father that the Father's plan may be fully accomplished.

Pause there. In other words, that means that God, the Father, is the one who wants this church to have unity of faith, unity of sacraments and hierarchical unity, communion within the hierarchy. That's God's actual plan for the church. That's not just some kind of institutional aspiration on the part of the human individuals who make up the church today. No this is the Father's plan. This is what Christ willed when he founds the church to have that kind of unity. Finally, back to John Paul:

To believe in Christ

This is important:

To believe in Christ means to desire unity. To desire unity means to desire the church. To desire the church means to desire the communion of grace, which corresponds to the Father's plan from all eternity. Such is the meaning of Christ's prayer, "Ut Unum Sint, that they may be one." John 17:21.

Notice that last line to believe in Christ means to desire unity. This means that a commitment to ecumenism, to authentic ecumenism, to the church's vision of unity is not an option. You don't get to say, "Well, I'm not an Ecumenical Catholic. I'm not committed to unity in the church." You don't have that option because the vision of unity, the desire for unity, the mission of unity that the church espouses is Christ's own mission. It's his prayer. And if you believe in Christ, it means it should mean that you desire unity in the church. Period. Because this was one of his deepest desires that he expressed in his very last words on earth. So I just leave that thought with you to ask the Lord, something to reflect on. Do I desire and do I work for, am I committed to unity in the church in the way that Christ himself did when he prayed the prayer, "Ut Unum Sint, that they may be one."