

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 7:55-60

^{7:55} But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

Commentary

The context of these verses is the trial of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen was chosen for service as a deacon along with seven other men who were commissioned to "wait on tables." (The Greek word *diakonia*, from which our word deacon comes, is translated as both "ministry" and "service.") Of that group, Stephen was singled out as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit." More than just a waiter serving windows, he did "great wonders and signs among the people." Members of the synagogue argued with Stephen—they charged him falsely with blasphemy and brought him before the council. Of all the charges, one was particularly important: Stephen dared to say that God's love was open to all people. This proclamation was a threat to those who wanted to keep the circle of God's love closed and to determine just who would be allowed in or who would be kept out. Acts 7 is Stephen's speech in his own defense. After rehearsing the long speech, the "heavens opened" and Jesus was standing at the right hand of God. When they saw this, the members of the court rushed on him. The Greek literally means they savaged him like a pack of dogs.

Reflection

Stephen dared to say that God's love was open to all people. Is God's love closed to anyone?

1 Peter 2:2-10

^{2:2} Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," ⁸ and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Commentary

Peter reminds his readers that Christ is the foundation stone on which to build a life. His argument cites a series of passages from the Hebrew Bible, almost as if there were a common list circulating in the church. This is one of the greatest passages in Scripture. Imagine a community of converted slaves, Jews who had been cast out of the synagogue, a few merchants or traders, so free artisans. None of them had any power, status, or religious standing. Yet Peter says to them, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." He says that God chose as valuable a "living stone" that the world rejected. The world may not see them as of much value, but look what God thinks of them! And, these persons are not chosen just for glory, but for witness. They are all those things so they can witness to all God has done in, for, and through them for the world.

Reflection

If the Christian life is about faithful living, what does the image of the stone suggest about the way we relate to Christ?

John 14:1-14

^{14:1} "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." ⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Commentary

These words are part of the "farewell discourse," the winding up of Jesus' life with his disciples. They begin with the comforting words we often hear at funerals. Here, Jesus is urging the disciples to stand firm in the face of his death. Jesus' words about going and preparing remind us that, in John's gospel, it is only Jesus' return to God that makes it possible for the disciples to enter into relationship with both Son and Father. "You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas misunderstands this and asks for clarification. The "way" here is not a destination or even a route for which we need a road map, but Jesus' reference to himself.

Reflection

Jesus promised to take his believers to himself in a place he had especially prepared. Is it a literal place, a spiritual state, or a redeeming relationship?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

- ^{31:1} In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
- ² **Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.**
- ³ You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
- ⁴ **take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.**
- ⁵ Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.
- ^{31:15} My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
- ¹⁶ **Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**