

“Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Words from our first reading today from the 7th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles – sisters and brothers, may the Lord give to you his peace and his joy.

A very old man lay dying in his bed. In death’s doorway, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies, wafting up the stairs. He gathered his remaining strength and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort, forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands. With labored breath, he leaned against the doorframe, gazing into the kitchen. Were it not for death’s agony, he would have thought himself already in heaven. There, spread out on newspapers on the kitchen table, were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies. Was it heaven? Or was it one final act of devotion from his wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man? Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself toward the table. His aged and withered hands shook as they made their way to a cookie at the edge of the table when he was suddenly smacked with a spatula by his wife. “Stay out of those, she said. “They’re for the funeral.”

In our readings today, we encounter the parallel stories of St. Stephen and Jesus who peered into heaven upon their impending deaths. While it may not have been the sight and smell of chocolate chip cookies, what they saw when they lifted up their eyes was nothing less than the glory and splendor of God. If there was any doubt in their mind before, it disappeared when they saw the heavens opened before them. They were convinced that they were in the right place, doing the right thing, that everything they were willing to sacrifice and go through was more than worth it so as to enter into that heavenly destiny opened up before them. Through *their* eyes, our readings today give us a glimpse of our Lord’s reign in heaven, where the Lord is king, the most high over all the earth. In his realm, there is no more sin, or evil, or suffering, or death. In heaven, we are all one with God and with each other and there is peace. There, Jesus has become the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end; he has become all in all. How wonderful heaven must be!

It was Jesus' greatest wish and prayer that we would come to share in that, that we too would experience such a true communion in the life of God, just as the Father and Son are one together in the Spirit, Holy Trinity, One God. And though Stephen was being stoned to death, his dying prayer was that others - even those others who persecuted him - would also come to share in that beatific vision: "Lord," he says, "do not hold this sin against them." And we know that this prayer of Stephen was answered when Jesus visited Saul on the road to Damascus to bring about a great conversion in his life. Saul went from being the murderer of Christians to St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles and one of the greatest missionaries and saints in our Church's history. That heavenly realm is breaking into ours. Easter reveals to us a new, resurrected existence. It is true, we don't experience that fully on this side of eternity, so our existence is also one of expectation, but it is also true that "all the way to heaven is heaven," as St. Catherine of Sienna was fond of saying. That is, as we strive to make our way to heaven, we do get to enjoy those same heavenly delights along the way.

What will help us in the meantime to reach our heavenly goal? The heavenly gaze of St. Stephen and Jesus, I think, is instructive for us today. Did you ever notice that we go where our eyes go? This is particularly true with new drivers on the road. When you are driving the car, and you start reading all the billboard signs on the side of the Thruway, or when you are passing an accident, or you are looking too close to the lines directly in front of the car, it takes a lot of discipline to keep our focus on the road ahead; otherwise, our eyes will lead us off the road and we'll crash the car. We go where our eyes go. This is true of other things as well. When we get home after a long day of work or school and we sit before a TV or a computer screen, our eyes get curious and before we know it, we realize we've wasted a lot of time on random videos and suggested sites and depressing news feeds or whatever and still feel just as tired as before. Many times, we judge others by what their wearing or by first impressions, or we have eyes only to recognize each other's faults. Often enough, we play those mind games, as we keep watching bad memories play out over and over again in our heads. Our eyes take us to many places. What things are we allowing our eyes to see? Where are our eyes taking us? Do we strive to see the good in others? Do we seek out good, holy, and wholesome things? Do we open our eyes to the miracles of God's grace happening around us? So, let us direct our gaze heavenward like St. Stephen and Jesus who lifted their eyes to the glory of God, that we may never lose sight of our goal of becoming one with the Lord.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Lectionary: 61

Reading I

Acts 7:55-60

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit,
looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God
and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,
and Stephen said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened
and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."
But they cried out in a loud voice,
covered their ears, and rushed upon him together.
They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him.
The witnesses laid down their cloaks
at the feet of a young man named Saul.
As they were stoning Stephen, he called out,
"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice,
"Lord, do not hold this sin against them;"
and when he said this, he fell asleep.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 97:1-2, 6-7, 9

R (1a and 9a) The Lord is king, the most high over all the earth.

or:

R Alleluia.

The LORD is king; let the earth rejoice;

let the many islands be glad.

Justice and judgment are the foundation of his throne.

R The Lord is king, the most high over all the earth.

or:

R Alleluia.

The heavens proclaim his justice,
and all peoples see his glory.

All gods are prostrate before him.

R The Lord is king, the most high over all the earth.

or:

R Alleluia.

You, O LORD, are the Most High over all the earth,
exalted far above all gods.

R The Lord is king, the most high over all the earth.

or:

R Alleluia.

Reading II

Rev 22:12-14, 16-17, 20

I, John, heard a voice saying to me:

“Behold, I am coming soon.

I bring with me the recompense I will give to each
according to his deeds.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last,
the beginning and the end.”

Blessed are they who wash their robes
so as to have the right to the tree of life
and enter the city through its gates.

“I, Jesus, sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches.

I am the root and offspring of David,
the bright morning star.”

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”

Let the hearer say, "Come."

Let the one who thirsts come forward,
and the one who wants it receive the gift of life-giving water.

The one who gives this testimony says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

Alleluia

Cf. Jn 14:18

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

I will not leave you orphans, says the Lord.

I will come back to you, and your hearts will rejoice.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Jn 17:20-26

Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed saying:

"Holy Father, I pray not only for them,

but also for those who will believe in me through their word,

so that they may all be one,

as you, Father, are in me and I in you,

that they also may be in us,

that the world may believe that you sent me.

And I have given them the glory you gave me,

so that they may be one, as we are one,

I in them and you in me,

that they may be brought to perfection as one,

that the world may know that you sent me,

and that you loved them even as you loved me.

Father, they are your gift to me.

I wish that where I am they also may be with me,

that they may see my glory that you gave me,

because you loved me before the foundation of the world.
Righteous Father, the world also does not know you,
but I know you, and they know that you sent me.
I made known to them your name and I will make it known,
that the love with which you loved me
may be in them and I in them.”