

Homily for the Feast of St. Stephen
December 26, 2016
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When we hear of the violence and anger that led to the martyrdom of St. Stephen in today's reading from Acts, it is easy to be startled by the stark contrast to the words of comfort and hope and birth that we heard in yesterday's readings of Christmas.

Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr, is described in scripture as a particularly virtuous man –full of grace and power, who did great wonders and signs among the people. He was a Hellenistic Jew, meaning a Greek-speaking Jew as opposed to a Hebrew-speaking Jew, and he was selected by his peers to be an archdeacon, or the eldest Deacon, in order to take care of the poor, the widowed and the orphans in the early church.

Stephen was a good, faithful and virtuous Jew who had come to realize that this man, Jesus, was the fulfillment of the prophecies he had heard all his life in the synagogues. Jesus had only recently been crucified when Stephen was being scrutinized by the Sanhedrin, and Stephen probably thought, like many Jews who had discovered Jesus, that because of the resurrection and all the wondrous things that had happened, he could persuade the people of his own faith to move forward together in the new Covenant and the belief that Jesus was the Messiah.

Stephen soon found out, though, that even though his speeches were eloquent and powerful enough for him to win every debate against the Jewish elders, they were causing a tremendous amount of trouble for him with one particular synagogue, the synagogue of the Freedmen. Really it's no wonder that they were offended. Stephen called them betrayers and murderers. And said "You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

Stephen's words were incendiary, but they were the truth, and as we all know – the most emotional and angry reactions often come from people who have been confronted with the deepest, most dangerous truths.

Stephen's words of truth caused so much anger that he was tried, convicted, and stoned to death for blasphemy. But how can we, as believers, ever really know the difference between the truth

and blasphemy? This question has plagued religion since its earliest beginnings, and I certainly don't have the answer. I can only speak from my own experience of trying to sort out the truth in my own journey of faith.

When presented with something that challenges my long-held beliefs I hold it up to the Corinthians passage on love and ask myself:

Is it patient?

Is it kind?

Does it not contain envy?

Does it not boast?

Is it not proud?

Does it not dishonor others?

Is it not self-seeking?

Is it not easily angered?

Does it not keep a record of wrongs?

Does it not delight in evil, but rather, does it rejoice with the truth?

Does it always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere?

If this new and challenging notion is all these things from Corinthians, then I can believe that it fits the definition of love, and if it is love I can accept it and I can move forward with it in my daily journey to grow closer to God.

Something happened when Jesus came into this world, and it was so powerful that people were, and still are, willing to die for it. Let us never forget them, and never fail to carry forward their message of love, non-violence and truth.