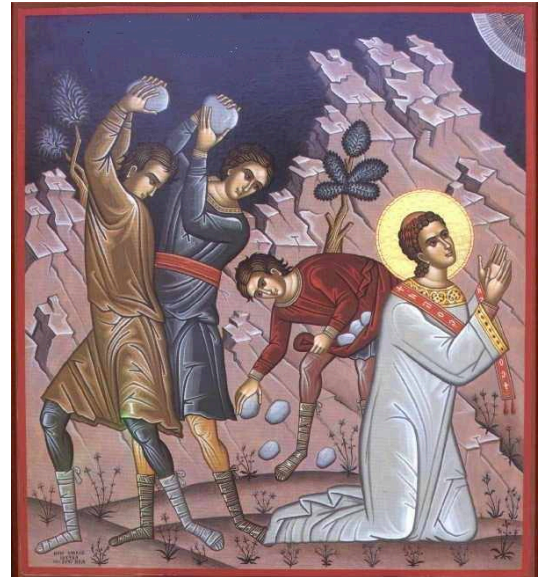


STEPHEN

Deacon & Martyr

Feast Day: 26 December

Collect: We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of the first martyr Stephen, who looked up to heaven and prayed for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ, who stands at your right hand; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.



Facts:

- First Christian martyr (called Protomartyr)
- One of the earliest deacons: one of “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3) chosen by the apostles to relieve them of the administrative burden of “serving tables and caring for the widows.”
- Stephen did more than serving tables—in Acts he gives sermons and does many miracles
- His religious work embroiled him in controversy with the Jewish community, who accused him of blasphemy and brought him before the Sanhedrin
- Famous sermon before the Council (see Acts 7)
- Sanhedrin was so furious that, without a trial, they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death
- Saul, later called Paul, was a bystander at the martyrdom who consented to Stephen’s death, thinking it justified
- But Stephen’s faith in Jesus and intercession for his persecutors no doubt influenced Paul’s work after his conversion
- As a result of Stephen’s death, the Christian community in Jerusalem fled and was scattered, and that is how Christianity began to spread throughout the region

Spiritual/Theological Teachings & Legacy

- Origin of ministry of deacons: “take the needs of the world to the church, and the care of the church to the world”
- Had a vision as he was stoned of Jesus standing at the right hand of God
- Began practice of praying for the people persecuting him that persisted through later martyrs, inspired by Jesus' teaching of praying for one's enemies
- Recounts the history of Israel in his sermon—appealing to the tradition of Judaism as a justification for faith in Jesus
- Went to great lengths in his sermon to portray Jesus as the Righteous One or Messiah, and blame the Sanhedrin for not recognizing him—major turning point in the rupture between Christians (who were still all Jews at this point) and Jews

Questions Raised by Life & Work

- What is the appropriate relationship of Christianity to Judaism? The historical context of oppression of both groups by Rome and the political situation that created deeply affected how the two religions split. How do we deal with the texts in the Bible describing Jews as enemies and persecutors of Jesus and of early Christians without adopting an anti-Semitic interpretation?
- What is the value of a deacon's ministry? When and where have you seen it work well? Is there a connection between Stephen's diaconate and his martyrdom?

My notes/observations/questions/prayer topics:

JUSTIN MARTYR

Martyr at Rome, ca. 110-167

Feast Day: 1 June

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, you found your martyr Justin wandering from teacher to teacher, seeking the true God, and you revealed to him the sublime wisdom of your eternal Word: Grant that all who seek you, or a deeper knowledge of you, many find and be found by you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.



Facts:

- Born in Samaria around the year 110 CE, family was not Christian
- Educated in Greek philosophy, and like Augustine after him, found his curiosity sparked but his soul left hungry
- Met a stranger while walking on a beach in Ephesus who told him about Christ, and "Straightaway a flame was kindled in my soul, and a love of the prophets and those who are friends of Christ possessed me."
- Around 150 CE, moved to Rome and started a school of Christian philosophy
- We have 3 of his works, one dialogue in the Platonic style, and two apologies (apologies as in "defenses of ideas")
- His works defend Christianity against the Greek charge of irrationality, the Roman charge of disloyalty to the Empire, and the Jewish charge of distorting the Hebrew Scriptures
- While teaching in Rome, Justin engaged in a debate with a philosopher of the Cynic school named Crescens
- Justin accused him of ignorance and immorality, and Crescens was so angry he brought legal charges against Justin
- Justin and six students were arrested and brought before the prefect Rusticus, given the chance to renounce their faith. They steadfastly refused and were beheaded in 167 CE

Spiritual/Theological Teachings & Legacy

- Was a supersessionist—interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures as a foreshadowing of the New Testament
- Foremost 2nd-century explorer of the Logos as a foundational concept in Christianity
- Claimed that the “seeds of Christianity” existed in thinkers before Christ, which allowed him to use Greek and Roman philosophers in his Christian philosophy
- Tried to defend Christianity as a safe and respectable part of the Roman Empire—a different strategy from others in the early Church, who saw themselves as the underground resistance to the Empire. This was ironic as he was eventually executed by the Empire for disloyalty

Questions Raised by Life & Work

- A question we covered in our very first sessions on 20th-21st century saints: what is the relationship of the believer to the state? Should Justin have tried to assimilate into the culture of the Empire (especially given that it ultimately did him no good)?
- Consider Justin in the light of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951)
 - Christ against Culture: history is the story of Christianity defeating pagan culture over time
 - Christ of Culture: the work of Christ unfolds directly in and of human society, and Christians should live and work there, not separately or apart
 - Christ above Culture: the things of the Spirit are above the things of the World, and Christians should live apart from the World
 - Christ and Culture in Paradox: the Church and the World have a struggling and always complex relationship
 - Christ transforming Culture: we are active partners in the building of the Kingdom of God here and now, infiltrating and changing the World

My notes/observations/questions/prayer topics:

PERPETUA & FELICITY

Companions & Martyrs, 202

Feast Day: 7 March

Collect: O God the King of saints, you strengthened your servants Perpetua and Felicity and their companions to make a good confession, staunchly resisting, for the cause of Christ, the claims of human affection, and encouraging one another in their time of trial; Grant that we who cherish their blessed memory may share their pure and steadfast faith, and win with them the palm of victory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.



Facts:

- Vibia Perpetua was a young widow, age 22, mother and owner of several slaves, including Felicity (Felicitas)
- They were catechumens preparing for baptism
- Early in the 3rd century, Emperor Septimius Severus decreed that everyone had to make sacrifices to the emperor as a god
- Perpetua, Felicity and many other Christians who refused were arrested and held in prison in dire conditions
- She was pregnant while in prison, and her father begged her to recant and capitulate for the sake of her child, but she refused
- They were sent to the arena to be mangled by a leopard, a boar, a bear and a savage cow
- They entered the arena singing praises to Jesus. Perpetua was “lost in spirit and ecstasy” and hardly knew what was happening to her
- The soldier who struck Perpetua in the throat did not kill her, and she was merely badly wounded. She screamed in pain, but then helped the soldier, guiding his sword for the killing blow. “Perhaps so great a woman, feared by the unclean spirit, could not have been killed unless she so willed it.”

Spiritual/Theological Teachings & Legacy

- Had three visions while in prison
 - Vision of a ladder to heaven, which she climbed to reach a large garden
 - Vision of her brother who had died as a child of a dreadful disease, now healed and well and drinking the water of life
 - The last was of herself as a warrior battling the Devil and defeating him to win entrance to the gate of life
- Perpetua and Felicity had a relationship that went far beyond mistress and slave. They were friends and companions, and their class difference was eliminated by their common devotion to Christ. They loved and encouraged one another, helping each other remain brave and steadfast in prison and approaching martyrdom
- Perpetua and Felicity and their companions embody the concept of certain realities of faith being more important and valuable than physical life. It is difficult for us modern people to understand why they would die for an idea, that Perpetua would deny her child a mother just so she could refuse to say some inconsequential words about the Emperor, but the martyrs have reached a state of life in Christ and depth of prayer and intimacy with God, that their own physical well-being is no longer their highest priority, and in fact is irrelevant compared to the love they know in God.

Questions Raised by Life & Work

- What would it be like for our intimacy with God, our lived experience of love, to be so real that all physical circumstances are rendered virtually irrelevant?
- What are we willing to give our lives for?

My notes/observations/questions/prayer topics:

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Bishop & Martyr, d. 115

Feast Day: 17 October

Collect: Almighty God, we praise your Name for your bishop and martyr Ignatius of Antioch, who offered himself as grain to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts that he might present to you the pure bread of sacrifice. Accept, we pray, the willing tribute of our lives and give us a share in the pure and spotless offering of your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.



Facts:

- Served as Bishop of Antioch, and saw his oncoming martyrdom as a fitting end to his ministry
- Converted to Christianity at a young age, identified by tradition along with Polycarp as a disciple of John the Apostle
- Legend that he was one of the children Jesus took in his arms and blessed
- Wrote 7 authenticated letters as he traveled across Asia Minor under arrest, chained up and under escort of Roman soldiers
- Valuable source of insight to the practices and controversies in the early Church
- First person to use the phrase “catholic church,” meaning “universal church”—from *katholikos*, “according to the whole”
- Martyred by being thrown to the wild beasts, possibly lions, in the Circus Maximus in Rome
- Remains were carried back to Antioch by followers and buried outside the city gates, later taken as relics to Rome
- About some controversies with regard to which texts were authentic as scripture, said, “To my mind it is Jesus Christ who is the ancient documents.”

Spiritual/Theological Teachings & Legacy

- “From things visible I no longer desire anything; I want to find Jesus. Fire and cross, wild beasts, broken bones, lacerated members, a body wholly crushed, and Satan's every torment, let them all overwhelm me, if only I reach Christ...I am the wheat of God, ground by the teeth of beasts to be found the pure bread of Christ.”
- Viewed his journey to Rome as a wedding procession to the great Banquet of Christ
- Taught that unity would always spring from common worship and sacrament, Baptism and Eucharist
- His thirst for bloody martyrdom seems strange to modern ears, but his soteriology (what it means to be saved and who Christ is as Savior) shows that he saw salvation as being free from the fear of death, i.e., able to bravely face martyrdom—this is a common theme of the martyrs, viewing union with God as complete freedom from all external circumstances
- Called the Eucharist “the medicine of immortality”

Questions Raised by Life & Work

- Was Ignatius a fanatic? How do we differentiate him from modern “martyrs” who detonate suicide vests? Both see their violent deaths as honoring God.
- Martyrdom is not about moderation in any way, shape, or form. It is about extremes of life, death, faith, violence, oppression, conviction, and principle. How do we reconcile this with a concept like the Via Media, a middle way, or moderation? We are not a people of extremes—do we believe in martyrdom?
- What are the spiritual dangers of martyrdom? Is it all about glorification of the ego with noble, ostentatious sacrifice? Is there such a thing as martyrdom over time? What is the value of martyrdom?

My notes/observations/questions/prayer topics: