

7th Sunday of Easter – June 1/2, 2019 – Reflection

“(A mob set upon Stephen who was preaching about the Risen Jesus in the city of Jerusalem, they) rushed upon him together ... they threw him out of the city, and began to stone him ... as they were stoning Stephen, 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 died.”

He was the first ... the first to die for his faith in Jesus Christ. He would not be the last.

We read about all of this sad and frightening violence and hatred in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the earliest days of the Church right after the Resurrection and Ascension, right after the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

This story of Stephen is remarkable in that it shows the conviction and courage of the early Christians who would not sell out their faith in Jesus, no matter what they were threatened with, no matter what pain they endured. Even at the point of death, Stephen still witnessed to Christ by speaking the same words Jesus had spoken from the cross, “Father, forgive them.”

Stephen died. The rocks hurt him. He bled. His bones were broken. His skull was crushed. The pain was awful. He was a young man. Perhaps he had parents who loved him, who begged him to be careful, not to be so public, so bold and brazen with his faith. And now, their son was dead and their hearts were broken. Nothing could console them, no one could

bring him back. But the text goes on to say that good people came out of hiding to console them: "Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him." They let his parents know that their son was much loved, that what he lived for would not be forgotten, that his death was not for nothing. These friends couldn't give him back to his grieving family, but they could be with them in their dark hour. They could give the young man a decent and honorable burial, even though other godly people had despised him and destroyed him. These good people, these early Christians, took care of a Mom and Dad in their great loss as if their son was a child of God. And it helped, it helped.

When I was on retreat a coupla weeks ago, I went to a parish church for Mass. I read in the bulletin a letter from a lady who was writing to thank people she didn't even know for all they did for her and her family at the time of her husband's recent death. She thanked the lay ministers who served the Mass, the musicians who played and sang so movingly, the priest who was so kind and uplifting in how he remembered her husband in his talk, the funeral attendants who lent such dignity to the farewell and burial, and the ladies who provided and served the beautiful luncheon in the parish hall for her family and guests after the burial. Her letter said she was still heart-broken but also so grateful that so many people cared. And it helped, she said, it helped.

One of the Christian Corporal Works of Mercy is "Bury the Dead." Every time you go to a wake, every time you drop off a covered dish, every time you send a sympathy card or Mass card, every time you take off work to go to a funeral, every time you serve at a Mass or craft a caring eulogy or sing the Ave Maria or the 23rd Psalm, every time you respect a funeral procession that slows traffic, every time you put

your hand over your heart as taps is blown on the bugle, every tear you shed, every hug you give to someone who's lost the love of their life, every time you did any of that, you gave your heart to someone who's heart was broken.

You may not know what to say. You may not be able to take away the pain. But, whatever little thing you said or did showed you cared and it helped ... it helped.