

Sunday, May 7, 2023 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

As we continue to celebrate the fifty days of Easter, today's gospel includes Jesus' promise that he goes to prepare a place for his followers in his Father's house. Our baptism commissions us to share Jesus' mission in the world. As 1 Peter reminds us, we are a holy people, called to proclaim the one who called us out of darkness into light. In words and deeds we bear witness to the risen Christ—our way, our truth, our life.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Give us grace to love one another, to follow in the way of his commandments, and to share his risen life with all the world, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Acts 7:55-60

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles to serve tables so that the apostles could be free to serve the word (Acts 6:1-6). Stephen does more than distribute food, however. For his preaching of God's word, he becomes the first martyr of the faith.

⁵⁵Filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] 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!" ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then 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. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then 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.

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

¹In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; let me never be | put to shame;
deliver me | in your righteousness.

²**Incline your | ear to me;**
make haste to de- | liver me.

³Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag | and my stronghold;
for the sake of your name, lead | me and guide me.

⁴**Take me out of the net that they have secretly | set for me,
for you are my tow- | er of strength.**

⁵Into your hands I com- | mend my spirit,
for you have redeemed me, O LORD, | God of truth.

¹⁵**My times are | in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who | persecute me.**

¹⁶Let your face shine up- | on your servant;
save me in your | steadfast love.”

Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:2-10

Christ is the cornerstone of God's saving work and the foundation of our lives. We are God's chosen, holy people who continuously celebrate and declare the mercy of God we experience through Jesus Christ.

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like 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. ⁶For 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.”

⁷To 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,”

⁸and

“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.

⁹But 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.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Gospel: John 14:1-14

On the night that he is to be arrested, Jesus shares final words with his disciples. As the one through whom God is known, he promises to go before them and act on their behalf.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In 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? ³And 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. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus 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’? ¹⁰Do 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. ¹¹Believe 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. ¹²Very 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. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

Prayers of Intercession

United in the hope and joy of the resurrection, let us pray for the church, the world, and all in need, saying “hear us, O God,” and responding, “your mercy is great.”

A brief silence.

God of life, strengthen your church to proclaim your gospel even in times of trouble. As we remember Stephen, we give thanks for diaconal ministry. Bless all deacons and strengthen them for their bridge-building ministry between church and world. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Creating God, you show your steadfast love through mighty waters, towering mountains, verdant fields, and arid deserts. Protect the earth’s diverse habitats from the forces of pollution, erosion, extinction, and global warming. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Mighty God, your Spirit guides us into all truth. Give wisdom to world and local leaders and organizations as they begin, build, or renew relationships. Strengthen leaders and aid organizations in areas needing to be rebuilt following conflict, unrest, or natural disaster (*especially*). Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Loving God, you make your home among us. Abide with refugees, those experiencing homelessness, those fleeing war and poverty, and all who question if there is a home in your heart. We pray for all who are sick (*especially*). Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Assuring God, you accompany your people amid uncertainty and change. Uphold people in this community who have recently moved, changed jobs or schools, retired, or are going through transitions of any kind. Lead us in your ways. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Renewing God, you gather the saints at your heavenly banquet. We give you thanks for the care shown us by those who have gone before us (*especially*). Grant confidence and comfort for all awaiting the place you have prepared. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Rejoicing in the victory of Christ’s resurrection, we lift our prayers and praise to you, almighty and eternal God; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.

Amen.

A reflection for this Fifth Sunday of Easter...

An image of Heaven

The words of today's gospel are most often heard during a funeral service. It is a popular choice of scripture for that occasion because the words provide wonderful assurance that the one who has died in Christ has now taken up residence in their heavenly home. The gospel begins by Jesus saying that he will prepare a place for each one of us. But as the text continues, we can see that our place is not an isolated room of our own in a giant heavenly mansion. Jesus' words are less about a place than a relationship: our relationship with Jesus and God the Father. They tell us that in Jesus we know all we need to know about God, and just as we can have a relationship with another human person, we can also have a relationship with God that will one day be as real and obvious as are our relationships with one another. The hope of one day being with Christ fully and forever is as real as the works we are called to do in his name today.

This text allows us the opportunity to contemplate what is ultimately unknowable, yet is also a central part of our faith: what heaven will be like.

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