

Third Week of Easter

Monday 27th April



Acts 6:8-15

First reading

They could not get the better of Stephen because the Spirit prompted what he said

Stephen was filled with grace and power and began to work miracles and great signs among the people. But then certain people came forward to debate with Stephen, some from Cyrene and Alexandria who were members of the synagogue called the Synagogue of Freedmen, and others from Cilicia and Asia. They found they could not get the better of him because of his wisdom, and because it was the Spirit that prompted what he said. So they procured some men to say, 'We heard him using blasphemous language against Moses and against God.' Having in this way turned the people against him as well as the elders and scribes, they took Stephen by surprise, and arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. There they put up false witnesses to say, 'This man is always making speeches against this Holy Place and the Law. We have heard him say that Jesus the Nazarene is going to destroy this Place and alter the traditions that Moses handed down to us.' The members of the Sanhedrin all looked intently at Stephen, and his face appeared to them like the face of an angel.

Responsorial Psalm

Gospel Acclamation

Jn20:29

Alleluia, alleluia!

'You believe, Thomas, because you can see me.

Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.

Alleluia!

Gospel

John 6:22-29

Do not work for food that cannot last, but for food that endures to eternal life

After Jesus had fed the five thousand, his disciples saw him walking on the water. Next day, the crowd that had stayed on the other side saw that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that the disciples had set off by themselves. Other boats, however, had put in from

Tiberias, near the place where the bread had been eaten. When the people saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into those boats and crossed to Capernaum to look for Jesus. When they found him on the other side, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’

Jesus answered:

‘I tell you most solemnly,
you are not looking for me because you have seen the signs
but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat.

Do not work for food that cannot last,
but work for food that endures to eternal life,
the kind of food the Son of Man is offering you,
for on him the Father, God himself, has set his seal.’

Then they said to him, ‘What must we do if we are to do the works that God wants?’ Jesus gave them this answer, ‘This is working for God: you must believe in the one he has sent.’

Fr Tim’s Reflection

The first readings all during this week continue the account of the early days of the church and the work of the first apostles in Jerusalem. Pentecost Sunday was a charismatic moment for the church, with the 11 disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, preaching to the crowds. Now, as time goes by, the apostolate needs some structure. We see the beginnings of this in the readings this week.

Meanwhile the gospel each day is taken from John chapter 6 – sometimes called *the bread of life* discourse. Jesus has fed the 5,000 with 12 baskets of scraps left over. He crosses the lake to find some quiet time, but the crowds work out where he is going and follow him. He uses this occasion to talk to them about their spiritual sustenance.

As the body of believers grew each day, the 11 were so busy teaching and preparing people for baptism they did not have time to attend to the practical administration of the church. Thus, after prayer and reflection, they chose 7 young men to be “deacons”. In fact, the word deacon in Greek just means youngster. Their job was to attend to the daily distribution of food. The community held everything in common, so it was quite a task to make sure that everyone had what they needed. Stephen was one of those chosen for the office of deacon.

As often happens in the church, some people are chosen for one function, but the Holy Spirit leads them to serve in other ways. Stephen did not content himself with just making sure everyone had enough to eat. He began to preach about the risen Lord Jesus, and his preaching was so effective, he soon caught the eye of the authorities.

Just as happened with Jesus, false witnesses were summoned so that he could be condemned on a trumped up charge. The innocent Stephen who had “the face of an angel” was promptly condemned.

Back to the gospel. After accusing his followers of seeking him out only because of the bread they hope to eat, Jesus begins to talk about what food really satisfies the soul. Working for God is believing in the one he has sent. We too follow seek our fill by believing that Jesus is the one sent by the Father. In these days our faith is tested, but each day we can pray that it be deepened. Let us ask for the gift of faith.

Third Week of Easter

Tuesday 28th April



First reading

Acts 7:51-8:1

'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'

Stephen said to the people, the elders and the scribes: 'You stubborn people, with your pagan hearts and pagan ears. You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted? In the past they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, and now you have become his betrayers, his murderers. You who had the Law brought to you by angels are the very ones who have not kept it.'

They were infuriated when they heard this, and ground their teeth at him.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand. 'I can see heaven thrown open' he said 'and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' At this all the members of the council shouted out and stopped their ears with their hands; then they all rushed at him, sent him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses put down their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul. As they were stoning him, Stephen said in invocation, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and said aloud, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'; and with these words he fell asleep. Saul entirely approved of the killing.

Responsorial Psalm

Gospel Acclamation

Jn10:14

Alleluia, alleluia!

I am the good shepherd, says the Lord;

I know my own sheep and my own know me.

Alleluia!

It is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven

The people said to Jesus, ‘What sign will you give to show us that we should believe in you? What work will you do? Our fathers had manna to eat in the desert; as scripture says: *He gave them bread from heaven to eat.*’

Jesus answered:

‘I tell you most solemnly,
it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven,
it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven,
the true bread;
for the bread of God
is that which comes down from heaven
and gives life to the world.’

‘Sir,’ they said ‘give us that bread always.’ Jesus answered:

‘I am the bread of life.
He who comes to me will never be hungry;
he who believes in me will never thirst.’

Fr Tim’s Reflection

The martyrdom of Stephen, that we read about in the first reading today, was one of those seismic events that changed everything for the early church. After a few brushes with the authorities, the disciples were more or less left in peace. The church grew in that peace and day by day, “those destined to be saved were added to their number”. This period of peace probably existed for a year or two. However, the teachings of Jesus were such a radical departure from traditional Jewish teaching that such a truce would not last for long.

Stephen, perhaps because of the fire of his enthusiasm, is singled out, falsely accused and condemned. He becomes the first follower of Jesus to follow his master to give his life for the truth. For this reason, we celebrate the feast of St Stephen in pride of place on the day after Christmas. His condemnation is not a formal one, the Roman authorities are not involved. He does not suffer the ignominious death by hanging on a cross. Instead, he is hustled out of the city and stoned to death by an angry mob. Like Jesus, he prays that his murderers be forgiven.

Notice another zealous young man is present at the stoning – Saul – who would become, first of all, the church’s prime persecutor, then later, its greatest defender. Though not actually throwing stones himself, he looks after the belongings of those who do. “He entirely approves of the killing”.

In the gospel, the crowds who had been fed by Jesus saw the spiritual significance of what Jesus had done. It reminded them of the time their ancestors were wandering through the desert, and Moses provided them with bread – *manna* – from heaven to eat. Jesus corrects them – it was not Moses who had provided the bread, but his Father.

Jesus likens himself to that divine bread “which has come down from heaven”. He is the one who alone can give life to the world. Jesus alone can completely satisfy us. Of course, his hearers get hold of the wrong end of the stick and look for food that will take away their physical hunger, and not the food that they need to feed their souls.

During this crisis, hopefully, everyone has enough to eat. Perhaps we are not able to indulge our palates in the way that we used to – we can’t visit our favourite restaurant or pop down to the pub for a gastro supper. The supermarkets are well stocked, but maybe I can’t find the more exotic ingredients I am accustomed to buying. But this can be an opportunity for us to reflect on what feeds our souls. Let us use the extra time to allow our friendship with Jesus to deepen so that our souls can be satisfied. Even when we don’t have access to Holy Communion, we can savour the Lord’s goodness and feast on his love.

Third Week of Easter

Wednesday 29th April

Feast of St Catherine of Siena



Acts 8:1-8

First reading

They went from place to place, preaching the Good News

That day a bitter persecution started against the church in Jerusalem, and everyone except the apostles fled to the country districts of Judaea and Samaria.

There were some devout people, however, who buried Stephen and made great mourning for him.

Saul then worked for the total destruction of the Church; he went from house to house arresting both men and women and sending them to prison.

Those who had escaped went from place to place preaching the Good News. One of them was Philip who went to a Samaritan town and proclaimed the Christ to them. The people united in welcoming the message Philip preached, either because they had heard of the miracles he worked or because they saw them for themselves. There were, for example, unclean spirits that came shrieking out of many who were possessed, and several paralytics and cripples were cured. As a result there was great rejoicing in that town.

Responsorial Psalm

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia, alleluia!

The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice,
says the Lord,

I know them and they follow me.

Alleluia!

Jn10:27

It is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son should have eternal life

Jesus said to the crowd:

'I am the bread of life.

He who comes to me will never be hungry;

he who believes in me will never thirst.

But, as I have told you,

you can see me and still you do not believe.

All that the Father gives me will come to me,

and whoever comes to me I shall not turn him away;

because I have come from heaven, not to do my own will,

but to do the will of the one who sent me.

Now the will of him who sent me

is that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me,

and that I should raise it up on the last day.

Yes, it is my Father's will

that whoever sees the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life,

and that I shall raise him up on the last day.'

Fr Tim's reflection

The martyrdom of St Stephen changed everything. For the church, nothing would ever be the same again. In Matthew's Gospel, as Jesus ascends into heaven, he instructs the 11 to go to all nations and baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. What do they do? They stay in Jerusalem and gather together a church of about 5,000 believers. If it were not for the death of Stephen, Christianity might to this day be a small Jewish sect!

After his death Christians had to quite literally "run for their lives". It was no longer safe to stay in one place. Worse still, a fanatical Pharisee, Saul, was determined to hunt them down and exterminate them. The 11 dispersed, seeking safety in other cities. Wonderfully, they took their message with them. Wherever they went they preached about Jesus, the one who had died for our sins and who the Father had raised to life again. Now the universal (Catholic) church was being born.

Perhaps this gave an opportunity to those early Christians to meditate on, and understand better, the words they had heard Jesus say in the bread of life discourse. Taking the message to other cities was the *will of the Father*. He wanted everyone to have the opportunity to hear and too believe. In travelling from place to place, they were doing the Father's will. This is what satisfied them. True, having to leave one's physical home was a life-changing experience, but now they could begin to find their true home: being apostles – literally ones sent.

St Catherine of Siena was a very holy woman, the 25th child of her parents, though most of her siblings did not survive the plague. Her sanctity was lived out in her charity towards others, especially in courageously looking after those in hospital with no thought of her own safety. The Dominican sisters of Siena taught her to read and helped her develop her own deep mystical spirituality. Others were attracted to her obvious holiness and she was influential in her age and became a force for good on the international stage. She even managed to convince the Pope, then in exile in France, to return to Rome. She is the patron saint of Italy and one of the co-patrons of Europe.

Life will never be the same again. Just as the plague shaped the development of Europe at the time of St Catherine, and just as the killing of Stephen shaped the destiny of the early church, so too the Coronavirus will shape our own age. Some hope that in a few months' time we will all be able to go back to our old lives and things will return to normal. In fact, life will never be the same again. As individuals and as church we need to work out how to be witnesses to Jesus in a world that is changed for ever. Hopefully, there will be some witnesses like St Stephen and like St Catherine to set us in the right direction.

Third Week of Easter

Thursday 30th April



First reading

Acts 8:26-40

Philip baptizes a eunuch

The angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Be ready to set out at noon along the road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza, the desert road.' So he set off on his journey. Now it happened that an Ethiopian had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem; he was a eunuch and an officer at the court of the kandake, or queen, of Ethiopia, and was in fact her chief treasurer. He was now on his way home; and as he sat in his chariot he was reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip, 'Go up and meet that chariot.' When Philip ran up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' 'How can I' he replied 'unless I have someone to guide me?' So he invited Philip to get in and sit by his side. Now the passage of scripture he was reading was this:

*Like a sheep that is led to the slaughter-house,
like a lamb that is dumb in front of its shearers,
like these he never opens his mouth.*

He has been humiliated and has no one to defend him.

*Who will ever talk about his descendants,
since his life on earth has been cut short!*

The eunuch turned to Philip and said, 'Tell me, is the prophet referring to himself or someone else?' Starting, therefore, with this text of scripture Philip proceeded to explain the Good News of Jesus to him.

Further along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Look, there is some water here; is there anything to stop me being baptised?' He ordered the chariot to stop, then Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water and Philip baptised him. But after they had come up out of the water again Philip was taken away by the Spirit of the Lord, and the eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Philip found that he had reached Azotus and continued his journey proclaiming the Good News in every town as far as Caesarea.

Responsorial Psalm

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia, alleluia!

The Lord, who hung for us upon the tree,
has risen from the tomb. Alleluia!

I am the living bread which has come down from heaven

Jesus said to the crowd:

'No one can come to me
unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me,
and I will raise him up at the last day.

It is written in the prophets:

They will all be taught by God,
and to hear the teaching of the Father,
and learn from it,
is to come to me.

Not that anybody has seen the Father,
except the one who comes from God:
he has seen the Father.

I tell you most solemnly,
everybody who believes has eternal life.

'I am the bread of life.

Your fathers ate the manna in the desert
and they are dead;
but this is the bread that comes down from heaven,
so that a man may eat it and not die.

I am the living bread which has come down from heaven.

Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever;
and the bread that I shall give is my flesh,
for the life of the world.'

Fr Tim's Reflection

Up to now, the Acts of the Apostles has been concentrating on the development and growth of the church in Jerusalem, led by the 11, but principally Peter and John. Now, after the killing of Stephen, the church is on the run, and the Acts turns its focus to developments outside of Jerusalem and led by others. Today we concentrate on Philip, who finds himself on the desert road that leads to Gaza.

Up to now all those who have come to believe in the name of the risen Lord Jesus were converts from Judaism. In fact, they probably still considered themselves Jews, but Jews who believed that Jesus was the long awaited messiah.

All of this is about to change. Philip has a chance encounter with an Ethiopian Eunuch – someone who most certainly was not a Jew, yet versed in the holy texts of the Jewish religion. Because of this story, the church in Ethiopia claims to be the oldest Christian church after the church in Jerusalem.

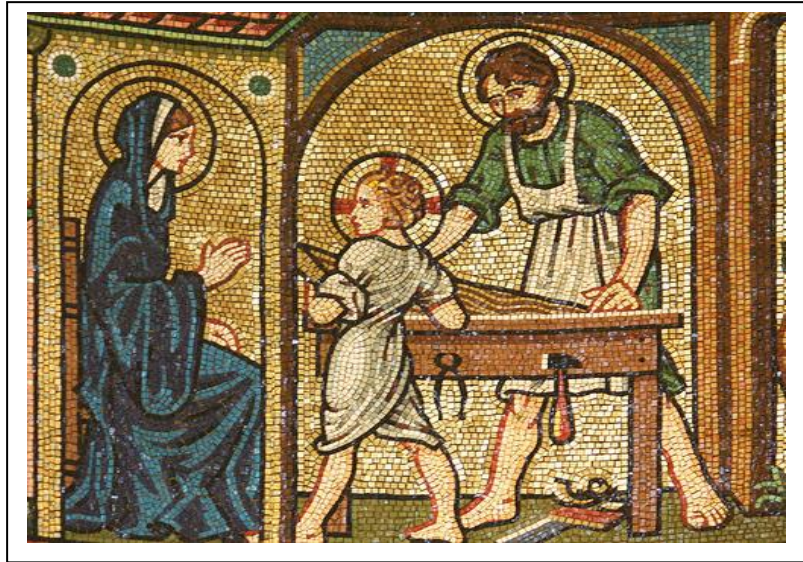
The method Philip uses to bring the eunuch to faith has been used by all missionaries ever since. He began where the person was at. Instead of trying to change his beliefs, he showed him how to interpret what he already believed. He already had faith in his heart, he just did not have a language to make that faith present to him. The eunuch is baptised and so becomes the first non-Jewish believer in Jesus Christ.

In the gospel, for the first time, Jesus identifies his flesh with the living bread that has come down from heaven. When we receive Holy Communion, we are not simply receiving some form of holy bread, we are actually eating the flesh of Jesus so that my flesh is nourished by his flesh. Not surprisingly, the followers of Jesus found this very hard to understand, and many stopped following him.

Third Week of Easter

Friday 1st May

Feast of St Joseph the Worker



First reading

Acts 9:1-20

This man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before the pagans

Saul was still breathing threats to slaughter the Lord's disciples. He had gone to the high priest and asked for letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, that would authorise him to arrest and take to Jerusalem any followers of the Way, men or women, that he could find.

Suddenly, while he was travelling to Damascus and just before he reached the city, there came a light from heaven all round him. He fell to the ground, and then he heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' he asked, and the voice answered, 'I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me. Get up now and go into the city, and you will be told what you have to do.' The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless, for though they heard the voice they could see no one. Saul got up from the ground, but even with his eyes wide open he could see nothing at all, and they had to lead him into Damascus by the hand. For three days he was without his sight, and took neither food nor drink.

A disciple called Ananias who lived in Damascus had a vision in which he heard the Lord say to him, 'Ananias!' When he replied, 'Here I am, Lord', the Lord said, 'You must go to Straight Street and ask the house of Judas for someone called Saul, who comes from Tarsus. At this moment he is praying, having had a vision of a man called Ananias coming in and laying hands on him to give him back his sight.'

When he heard that, Ananias said, 'Lord, several people have told me about this man and all the harm he has been doing to your saints in Jerusalem. He has only come here because he holds a warrant from the chief priests to arrest everybody who invokes your name.' The Lord replied, 'You must go all the same, because this man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before pagans and pagan kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he himself must suffer for my name.' Then Ananias went. He entered the house, and at once laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, I have been sent by the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on your way here so that you may recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately it was as though scales fell away from Saul's eyes and he could see again. So he was baptised there and then, and after taking some food he regained his strength.

He began preaching in the synagogues, 'Jesus is the Son of God.'

Responsorial Psalm

Gospel Acclamation

cf.Lk24:46,26

Alleluia, alleluia!

It was ordained that the Christ should suffer
and rise from the dead,
and so enter into his glory.

Alleluia!

Gospel

John 6:52-59

My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink

The Jews started arguing with one another: 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' they said. Jesus replied:

'I tell you most solemnly,

if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,
you will not have life in you.

Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood
has eternal life,

and I shall raise him up on the last day.

For my flesh is real food
and my blood is real drink.

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood
lives in me
and I live in him.

As I, who am sent by the living Father,
myself draw life from the Father,
so whoever eats me will draw life from me.

This is the bread come down from heaven;
not like the bread our ancestors ate:
they are dead,

but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.'

He taught this doctrine at Capernaum, in the synagogue.

Fr Tim's Reflection

If the death of St Stephen was one seismic change in the history of the early church, then the conversion of Saul, the persecutor of the Christian, to Paul, its greatest apostle, was another.

He is brought to faith in Jesus Christ by direct intervention. On the road to Damascus Jesus appears to Saul and challenges him: "Why are you persecuting me". Paul says of himself that he is one born out of time. One can imagine the apprehension of Ananias who was asked by God to take away Saul's blindness, but in restoring his physical sight, his spiritual sight is restored as well, and Saul begins to see things from God's point of view. This man Jesus is not the enemy, but the Christ of God.

Much of the rest of the Acts of the Apostles follows Saul, who becomes Paul, and who is able to fulfil the command of the Lord to bring to faith to the ends of the earth.

Looking at the gospel, Jesus tells his followers that unless they can eat his flesh, and drink his blood, they cannot draw life from the Father. Of course this was before the Last Supper. His followers could never have guessed that Jesus would transform bread and wine into his body and blood.

As the early church was persecuted, one of the charges brought against Christians was that they were cannibals, a practice abhorrent to Roman culture. When Christians were asked whether they really ate the flesh of Jesus and whether they really drank his blood in the celebration of the Eucharist, they admitted that they did. They would rather die by being thrown to the lions, than deny that they ate flesh and drank blood in communion. We look forward to the time when we too can eat his flesh and drink his blood. We can pray through the intercession of St Joseph, father of the church, that this will be soon!