**Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year C)**

**29th May 2022**

***The Spirit and the Bride***

**First Reading Acts 7:55-60**

The fifty days between Easter and Pentecost form one continuous celebration of the Easter events, with different emphases and points of view. This last Sunday celebrates the enthronement of Christ at the right hand of the Father. Stephen, one of the new Order of Deacons, established to help the Apostles with routine administration, becomes the first of many called upon to follow the Lord in the taking up of a cross. (The word ‘deacon’ was Greek for ‘servant’)

As such, Stephen provides a role model for those who followed him. And at the moment of his death, Stephen is granted a vision of heaven, with the Son of man "standing at the right hand of God."

There are two unusual features here. One is the use of the title "Son of man"—this is the only time the phrase is used by anyone other than Jesus himself (John 12:34 is only a partial exception, for here the Jews are merely repeating Jesus' own words).

The second is that Christ is portrayed as standing rather than sitting at God's right hand. The ‘right hand’ was the place for the Sovereign’s Major Domo, while the posture of sitting implied that one’s work was completed. Standing was the attitude of prayer.

There is no obvious explanation of either of these features. Perhaps the title "Son of man" is used here because it suggests that the exalted Christ is pleading the cause of his first martyr, in anticipation of his function as Son of man at the last judgment (Luke 12:8-9; Mark 8:38), and maybe standing in order to welcome his martyr into heaven. In any case, Stephen's martyrdom is an appropriate gospel for this day, because it gives a vision of the ascended Lord.

The most striking feature of Stephen's martyrdom is its similarity to the passion of Jesus in Luke's version in his Gospel. Jesus is tried before the Sanhedrin and the decisive element of his trial is his statement about the Son of man at the right hand of God (Luke 22: 69). He was then led out of the city to be killed, while he forgave his killers and commended his soul to the Father (23:26, 34, 46). Stephen, too, was hauled before the council (Acts 6:12) and dragged out of the city to be stoned to death (7:58). He also forgave his killers (7:60).

But, there is also a telling difference in that while Jesus had committed his spirit to his Father, Stephen committed his to the Lord Jesus. Luke's lesson is clear: Jesus is the human face of God with the power to receive the faithful into heaven.

**Responsorial Psalm: 97:1-2, 6-7 & 9**

This psalm is likely to have been composed for the Coronation of one of Judah’s Kings before the Exile. It is noteworthy that the earlier parts of the Old Testament do not deny the existence of other gods but simply assert that Yahweh is above them all. Similarly, in the New Testament, Christ at his Ascension triumphs over the demonic forces of evil (Philippians 2:10). If we were to try to translate this into modern terms, we might say that Christ is above all the worldly alternatives that the unimaginative choose for themselves.

**Second Reading Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17 & 20**

With their climate in mind, it is unsurprising that a garden with running water and shady fruit trees should be such a symbol of Paradise in so many middle-eastern cultures. The Garden of Eden in Genesis Chapter 2 is representative of them.

But alongside this ideal our ancestors also had to account for hardship and failure to realise their ideal. So at the centre of Eden were two trees bearing fruit that were just out of bounds. Knowledge and Life.

For John the tree of life was located inside the heavenly city and those who had been baptised could enter through the gates to feed on the fruit. The ‘city’ is coterminous with the ‘church’ and as we saw last week, there is no ‘temple’ as God’s presence is no longer confined to the Temple, but is present throughout the whole of the city. So the tree of life is free to all but located within the city. The beatitude (v. 14) makes eternal life obtainable by anyone but only through the blood of the Lamb.

**Gospel: John 17:20-26**

To-day’s Gospel is the third element of a long prayer of Jesus. In the first element, he prays for himself (17;1-5). In the second he prays for his disciples (17;6-19) and in to-day’s reading for the future Church who will 'believe through their word' It is a prayer "that all may be one." It is a prayer that has not been granted.

In a Missionary conference at Edinburgh in June 1910 it was realised that evangelism in the new colonies had been handicapped by superficial denominational and cultural differences. All delegates were Protestant and many of their voices since have loudly advocated an invisible unity of all true Christians whose identity is known only to God. (The only others were Orthodox observers from countries in which missionary work had taken place. No Catholics were present).

After John XXIII became Pope in 1958, Roman Catholics began to participate in the ecumenical movement. In 1999 Lutherans and Catholics signed a “common declaration” on justification, the topic that had been the major theological issue in the Reformation of the 16th century.

But, what we have to realise is that in the time of John’s Gospel, there were nothing comparable to our denominations. Christian denominations are not what he had in mind. There were heretical groups who adopted some Christian features but neither are they the threat that prompted the high-priestly prayer of to-day’s Gospel. The unity for which he prays is not that grounded on understanding other people’s doctrines, or on a mutual respectability, but on an intense love between individual members of a congregation, whose common loyalty to the Lord eclipses every division.

The unity of the Church is a unity based on the common sharing of word and sacraments, despite personal differences. It is through this liturgical act that Christ in his risen life becomes present in the world to-day.

The first half of this Sunday's gospel concerns the life of the Church on earth, known as the Church Militant, Its unity is one for mission, a unity whose aim is that the world may believe "that thou hast sent me." The second half of the gospel turns to the final destiny of the Church—what we traditionally call the Church Triumphant.

This prayer is, in its way, a commentary on the passion of Jesus which reflects the author’s themes. These can be illustrated by the words frequently used throughout the Gospel, belief, knowledge, witness, world and glory. Jesus comes into this world to reveal the Father to the disciples he has chosen and then returns.

The mission of the disciples (vv. 6-19) will be efficacious, made so by the prayer of Jesus. The power of his prayer reaches out to those others, those who will come to believe in him. The Greek actually means *'believe into him*' for faith means a personal relationship with Jesus, union with him. And Jesus prays for the unity of the community. Unity follows on the communion of the Christian with Father and Son.

The missionary role is not lost to sight: 'that the world may believe.' Those later disciples, like the initial group, are sent, as the Master was, 'to testify to the truth' (18:37). 'Glory' will be theirs as, in their turn and measure, they make Father and Son known. But they can have this glory', this revealing role, only if they are one with Father and Son and with one another. Only so will their witness have force. Only so will it be witness to a God who is love.