

LOCKDOWN DAY 130 – 3 AUGUST 2020

Molweni dear family and friends of False Bay Diocese,

Scripture: Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-60. Matthew 10:17-2

Hymn: *Make me a channel of your peace*

Happy Monday and new week, happy August, happy back to school for matric teachers and learners. Let us not fear and let us know that our Lord provides caring in the face of so many fear-creating factors.

We have the option of celebrating St Stephen today rather than on 26 December. St Stephen is the first martyr who **laid down** his life for the Lord Jesus. He loved the Lord to the full extent, even unto death. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and he saw the glory of God. Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew of Jerusalem.

Hardly one year had passed after the Death and Resurrection of the Lord when Stephen was ordained a **deacon**. What we know today as **distinctive deacons or permanent deacons**, were already there in the early church. The Church of Jerusalem had 5 000 members and the number was growing. Therefore, the Apostles felt the need of helpers. Stephen was the first of seven deacons appointed to help the Apostles with some of the administrative burden of leadership and with preaching, baptising and distributing alms. He zealously preached the faith and “performed great miracles and wonders among the people.” In False Bay, our numbers continue to grow and we need many distinctive deacons/permanent deacons going forward, especially as we reimagine the church after Covid-19. Would be wonderful to have seven distinctive deacons in each Archdeaconry.

Stephen was a well-educated person and knew Greek very well. Therefore, he devoted himself to the service of the Greek converts. He was full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of grace and fortitude. He went about his mission with great zeal, and God enabled him to work miracles. He regularly preached in the synagogues and fearlessly proclaimed that Christ is the saviour of the entire human race. Stephen reproved the Pharisees for their hardness of heart and for crucifying the long-awaited Messiah.

This, naturally, enraged his accusers. When the Jews could not refute his arguments they bribed witnesses to charge him with blasphemy against Moses and against God. They spread false and defamatory statements about him, which created disturbances against Stephen. Stephen was taken before the Council. Stephen knew that God was with him. He had set his mind on things that are in heaven. He made a fiery speech in defence of the Church (Acts 7:1-53).

The **first point** Stephen made was that God is present not only in the Temple in Jerusalem but everywhere. God was with Abraham in Chaldea, with Joseph of old in Egypt, with Moses in Sinai, with the Israelites in the desert and with David before the Temple was built. His **second point** was that the patriarchs of Judaism habitually rejected the messengers sent by God. Thus, Stephen shows, the new religion that he follows is willed by God as the fulfilment of the old one. He affirms and defends the universality of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Stephen’s teaching made it clear that old wineskins could not contain the new wine of Christ.

Unable to contain their anger any longer, they dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death. The dying Stephen knelt down and prayed to the Lord to **forgive** those who were **killing** him.

There was a young man called Saul watching the cloaks of the witnesses and consenting to Stephen’s death. This Saul would later become the great Apostle Paul. He who was a persecutor of Christians would later be persecuted for the cause of Christ and even die for him. St Augustine observed that if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have gained Paul. The Christian community in Jerusalem, taking fright at the Jews’ hostility, was scattered, so that for the first time the gospel of Christ began to spread beyond Jerusalem.

The life of Stephen was a life of generosity. He received grace, wisdom and power from God. In return he gave his time, his abilities and his life for God. The death of Stephen was very much like the death of the Lord himself. The dying Lord said, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." The dying Stephen said, "Lord do not remember their sin against them." Christ on the Cross said, "Father into your hands I commend my spirit." Stephen called upon the Lord and said, "Jesus, receive my spirit." The disciple became very much like his Master in sacrificing himself, in forgiving his killers and in dying. The name "Stephen" means winner of the crown, and indeed he won the glorious crown of martyrdom.

If we just have a look at our own lives, how much have we not received from God and human beings? And how little have we given them! Speaking for myself, I have received much more than I deserve. We are always on the receiving end, always saying "Thank you." During this **month of compassion**, let us say to those in need "Please receive this" or "Let me do this for you." If we cannot be martyrs for the faith, we can at least learn **generosity** from Stephen – **generosity** in self-sacrificing, giving and forgiving. St Francis of Assisi, in his beautiful prayer, says, "It is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

In the face of the difficulties of Covid-19, let us like Stephen, serve with grace, fortitude and zeal. Do not run ahead of **grace**. Recognize that Jesus has and is walking with us on this Covid-19 journey. The mystery of God's goodness cannot be exhausted. There will always be a handful of people who will make false statements about us. Stephen teaches us to forgive intentionally and decisively.

Stephen was loving and generous to the end, and he gave all that he had and all that he was. The love that Christ brought from heaven lifted Stephen up from the earth. While he was being stoned, he looked to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right-hand side of God (Acts 7:55-56). The gates of heaven were thrown open to welcome Stephen. Some devout people buried Stephen, mourning for him with loud cries (Acts 8:2)

As it is Women's month, let us give all that we are in the fight against Gender based Violence, sexual harassment, domestic violence and rape. Let us not remain silent and let us refuse to hide any perpetrators of GBV. Name and shame peers who are responsible for acts of abuse. Let us listen to the victims. The shame is always on the perpetrator and not on the victim. We encourage men and women to take a stand against women abuse. We pray that persecutors of women will be struck by the Holy Spirit like Saul who became the great Apostle Paul. Men needing help to change, also need to come forward.

Every time we die for Jesus, as Stephen did, we are coming to life. Every time we die for Jesus, we are being born anew. Birth and death are but two facets of the mystery of life: one speaks of entry and the other of exit when we make a deeper entry from time to eternity, from earth to heaven, from the here and now to the hereafter.

Let us pray to the Lord to confirm us in the faith to which Stephen bore witness by his blood. Let us learn from him the charity that extends from distribution of goods to love for enemies and sacrifice of self.

Today, please **reach out** to any matric learner or teacher, any deacon and anyone with the name of Stephen.

In our prayers, **we pray** for Zimbabwe, our neighbouring country. We pray the prayer attributed to St Francis on page 91 of An Anglican Prayer Book. The Collect for St Stephen can be found on pg 316 of An APB. We pray for vocations to the Distinctive Diaconate (See pg 332 of An APB). We close with Canticle 13 on page 352 of An APB.

I am, Because We are, Because God is.....Opening hearts to heal God's World. *Hold on to hope.*