



MARTYR'S SUNDAY/ALL SAINTS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Tuesday, November 1, 2011

Lewis E. Logan, II, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Co-Founder, Ruach Christian Community Fellowship, Los Angeles, CA

Lection – Acts 7:52-60 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 52) Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. (v. 53) You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” (v. 54) When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. (v. 55) But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. (v. 56) “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (v. 57) But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. (v. 58) Then 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. (v. 59) While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (v. 60) Then 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.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Scott P. Richert, featured author of numerous articles on Catholic moral, social, political, and historical issues, writes that All Saints Day is a very old Christian tradition remembering Christians who have given their lives for the cause of Christ. Initially, anniversaries marked the death of individual martyrs; however, as the incidences of martyrdom greatly increased as a result of severe persecutions at the hands of the Roman Empire, local dioceses instituted a common feast day during which all martyrs, known and unknown, were properly honored. In the early centuries, this feast was celebrated in the Easter season, and the Eastern Churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, still celebrate it then. The current date of November 1 was instituted by Pope Gregory III (731–741) when he consecrated a chapel to all of the martyrs in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome and ordered an annual celebration. This celebration was originally confined to the diocese of Rome, but Pope Gregory IV (827–844) extended the feast to the entire Church.

Today we celebrate and reflect upon martyrdom in the sense that all who die for justice, freedom, peace, and parity are martyrs and therefore should be celebrated.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Acts 7:52-60

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Mamie Carthan and Ali al-Khatib, though removed by 56 years, 6,600 miles, millennial technologies, jet magazine still shots, and YouTube videos, made the same difficult decision concerning their martyred teenaged children. Although Emmitt Till (son of Mamie), 14, and Hamza Ali al-Khatib (son of Ali), 13, themselves were also 56 years apart, the world witnessed unfathomable horror by seeing the brutality visited upon these innocent children. Mrs. Carthan’s 1955 decision to have her son Emmitt Till’s mutilated body displayed in an open casket funeral was the catalyst for social change during the modern civil rights era. Amidst the hundreds of Syrians protesting the beleaguered regime of President Bashar al-Assad, Hamza’s name is chanted daily as the cry of Syrian resistance and revolution because Mr. Ali al-Khatib posted Hamza’s mutilated image on YouTube. Perhaps Mr. Khatib will publish on Kindell an online book entitled “Innocence Lost Revolutions’ Gain” as a sequel to Mrs. Carthan’s 2003 book, The Loss of Innocence.

While history is still being written in the blood of the innocents, the shock and horror of martyrdom is constantly reinvested into renewed efforts which may effectuate justice, freedom, vigilance, and, yes, even revolution.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

What better passage from the canon could be used to reflect today’s liturgical moment than the narrative of Stephen’s martyrdom. Luke, the Gentile author of Luke-Acts, chronicles the very first “All Saints Day” celebration by bringing together the perpetrators of the martyrdom, the martyr himself, and the martyr exemplar, Jesus Christ, whose martyrdom proves inspirational and instructive. In the martyrdom of Stephen, Saul, who witnessed and perhaps participated in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:60; 8:1), was present. Stephen was not only the witness suffering martyrdom but he bore witness to the Christ-centered paradigm of Jesus’ martyrdom by repeating the inspirational words of Jesus (Matthew 5:12; Luke 23:33; Acts 7:60).

It is noteworthy that Jesus is present for Stephen in his martyrdom moment in a way that God the Creator was not visibly or audibly present for Jesus during his crucifixion (Matthew 27:46; Acts 7:55-56). Unlike the descending dove and thundering voice which occasioned Jesus' baptism ["And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17 NRSV)], God was peculiarly absent during the baptism of Jesus in his own shed blood on Calvary's cross.

Stephen's vision of the risen and transcendent Christ invites those of us who are remembering the ultimate self-offering of martyrs throughout Christian Church history to be clear that Jesus is not only present with us in our martyrdom but also substantiates the victory over death that occurs in martyrdom. Jesus teaches in Matthew 10:28: "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Further, we are sure to note that being full of the Holy Ghost provides vindicating comfort for the victimized and peace for the persecuted. With this vision of Jesus who sees and stands with us we will not perish.

As readers today we implicitly and existentially become Saul or Stephen as we bear witness to this passage and moment. Are we like Saul—complicit in, part of, dependent upon, or comfortable with the current structural, systemic historical constructs which dehumanize and exploit people? Or are we among those who speak and act in altruistic courageous defiance like Stephen? Today's scripture and liturgical moment touch the heart of our faith in and commitment to Jesus; as we embrace the disruptive historical narrative of Jesus as crucified, risen, and returning Messiah we are engaging in both a crisis and an opportunity. This passage challenges us to live purposefully and courageously in the present through reflecting on the past experience of the ultimate sacrifice of others.

Luke's prescriptive rendition of Stephen's martyrdom mirrors Jesus' own suffering and crucifixion involving an Old Testament allusion, a critique of the current perpetrators who kill the prophets, and a supernatural sense of divine presence amidst the shadows of death's immediacy. Stephen is as aware of Jesus' words as Jesus was aware of Stephen's martyrdom. Jesus asserted in Matthew 5:11-12: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." How is Stephen blessed though persecuted and stoned? Is there a spiritual kinship, a oneness, a unifying awareness that persecution and death for bearing witness to Jesus Christ makes you in fact one with Christ? Are the synonymous plights and end results the creation of prophets?

Prophetic pronouncements by nature lay real the threat to human constructs, systems, policies, perceptions, and beliefs that are propped up by the incestuous idols of human ingenuity, machinations, and cognitions. Stephen's bold proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah struck at the heart of the central Hebrew narrative that substantiated the religious leader's theological and socio-political hegemony. The compelling nature of Jesus' martyrdom and subsequent resurrection laid the basis for transformational disruption based upon the ultimate hope rooted in purposeful death and preminent resurrection. It is purposeful in the sense that it is a threat to the current socio-

political construct because it inspires those victimized by it to give their lives as they move from fear-driven compliance to non-violent direct revolutionary resistance even unto death. Resurrection is preeminent in the sense that the resulting historical-structural changes are born of the blood inspired by ultimate hope and irrefutable vision which transcend time!

Colossians 1:18 says, “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.” Thus Luke suggests that the universal Messianic nature of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection is therefore available to all humanity. Jesus, ultimately, is not just disruptive to the religious leaders who would not accept Jesus as the fulfillment of prophetic expectation but Jesus Christ is also the Savior of Jew and Gentile alike. While some commentators may suggest that Luke’s intention is to prove that the Christian Church is neither anti-government or counter-cultural to Roman hegemony, it is important to note that Christianity is by its own monotheistic claim diametrically oppositional to the theistic presupposition of the Roman emperor. Such an irreconcilable contradiction necessarily resulted in an inevitable tension reconcilable only through martyrdom of many of the faithful.

Who knows what 2012 will bring while the United States empire gears up to orchestrate the hoax of democratic elections on the global stage. The cryptic stylized haunting original rap of the late Gil Scott Heron may yet be vindicated: “The revolution will not be televised”—the revolution is LIVE! Every time we celebrate Martyrs/All Saints Day we consider the ultimate price others have paid to reshape the world as we know it today. We may feel compelled to ask ourselves the question, Is the hope for which the martyrs died yet come to pass? If their spilled seed has borne fruit, will we give thanks? If not we may want to ask ourselves the question, Have we found something worth dying for?

Celebration

Stephen’s martyrdom inspires us with the hope that if we die like Jesus through persecution we will live like Jesus beyond persecution! History will be changed forever as our acts inspire others to live and die for the causes of Christ.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The bellowing voice of Stephen against the chorus of angry religious leaders rudely interrupting him, insisting that he and Jesus are frauds; thuds of stones hitting Stephen; Stephen speaking loudly though painful stones pelt him; post-mortem silence;

Setting: In Jerusalem perhaps the temple courtyard or some public location for mass gatherings;

Mood: Extremely tense and intimidating, yet peace is within Stephen who is filled with the Holy Ghost and a powerful sense of purpose and certainty; and

Sights: The vision that Stephen sees—the exalted Christ taking note of his suffering; stone throwers who do not see who Stephen sees; and red blood.

III. Suggestions That Clergy, Christian Educators, and Others Can Use

Consider the following:

(A) The illegitimacy of any system which feasts upon its innocents substantiates the need for complete and total revolution. An April 4, 2011 Los Angeles Times article reporting the April 1, 2011 death of Columbia University professor Manning Marable reflected upon his musings about the way that his life was changed or was irrevocably reinvented by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The article reported that he wrote in his 1996 book, Speaking Truth to Power: Essays on Race, Resistance and Radicalism, “With Martin’s death, my childhood abruptly ended. My understanding of political change began a trajectory from reform to radicalism.” In other words, Dr. Marable felt that Dr. King’s death/martyrdom was his (Marable’s) turning point for radicalized engagement in social change reflection and action. Hence, his mindset changed from that of systemic reformation (changing aspects of the current system) to radical transformation, that is to revolutionize or replace the current systemic construct.

Apparently, Dr. King’s assassination or martyrdom still remembered to this day makes his words even more impactful: “If a man/person has not found something worth dying for he/she is not fit to live.” Ironically, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Yemen, and other North African nations may be closer to revolution than those of us in North America. The systemic radical change we have witnessed in North Africa, a byproduct of this season of martyrdom mis-named the “Arab Spring,” may have produced an early tremor in Wisconsin, USA. While radicalized action among state employees brought the state capital to a halt, radical change still eludes us. There have been no reported martyrs.

The year 2011 may yet be remembered for a lot of man-made events like the unprecedented carbon-induced, climate-change-spawned hyper-atmospheric tornado activity in the Midwest, killing hundreds; the geo-centric tsunami which shook Japan, the world’s third largest nuclear power, killing thousands; and martyr-driven overthrows, uprisings, and revolutions (death toll unknown). The historical chroniclers’ pen dipped in a plentiful well of crimson has yet to record the decisions we will make whether or not to mourn individually Tunisia’s Mohamed Bazouzi, Syria’s Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, South Africa’s Noxolo, or Oakland, California’s Oscar Grant. Perhaps we will continue the tradition established by Pope Gregory IV to mourn or remember all martyrs en masse. Whatever the case, we must ensure that while we remember the price and promise of martyrdom, we stay connected to the unique narrative of each martyr so that we never forget them. Remember the disproportionate execution of uneducated and poor African Americans on death row or in police custody, murdered Tunisians, snipered Libyans, shot Bahrainians, crushed Jordanians, tortured Syrians, lynched Mississippians, disappeared Egyptians, assassinated Pakistanians, drone-attacked Afghans, starved Palestinians, or killed Israelis. It’s certain, martyrdom remembered is revolution revisited, reinvented, and realized.

(B) Suggested Sermon Titles

- What Will You Die For?
- A Good Death

(C) Quotes

- “I submit to you that if a man hasn’t discovered something he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”
—Martin Luther King Jr., Speech in Detroit, June 23, 1963
- “Celebrating martyrs of the recent or distant past reminds us of the essence of Christian discipleship.”
— Lewis Logan
- “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 1937
- “We ought to always remember the worst holocaust in human history is the tens of millions of Africans who died during the years of the illegal, immoral, and inhumane transcontinental slave trade.”
— Lewis Logan
- “We are the people of the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow.”
—Africa’s Song by Dr. Ali Al amin Mazrui, The Africans: A Triple Heritage, 1986