The Stone Heap

May 10th, 2020

5th Sunday of Easter

One of the saddest scenes in cinematic history is watching Rachel, played by Silvana Mangano, succumb to stoning for her witness of Jesus in the epic film *Barabbas* starring Anthony Quinn. Imagine that rocky pit and the stone heap. You see the angry faces. You see the flying stones. You see the angelic face of truth being buried beneath these stones. That is a great metaphor for history—the repetitive burial of goodness and truth under a heap of stones. Some days, we might feel that our lives are being brought to a metaphorical stone heap, we are being buried alive in our problems, in the criticisms of others, in the hostility of a world that resists the Holy Spirit. It is a painful place to be, even if the stones are not physical. And yet, the stone heap where the first martyr perishes is something of a paradox. There are moments in history when we do not understand the events we are observing or even the historical persons we are encountering. It is not usual, perhaps, to think of ourselves as historical characters or figures, but we are, whether we are famous or not. It is also strange, perhaps, to have the story of an execution in our Easter season, but then again, Easter only exists because of an execution—the Lord Jesus who was raised first had to be executed on a cross. Our story today comes to us as the first vision of the Risen Christ after the ascension: “When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 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. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” (Acts 7:54-56).

The murderers who stone Stephen reject two things—their history and the good news. They were already enraged by the sermon Stephen had preached, which was a meditation on the history of their people and the word of the prophets, as we read in Acts 7:2-53. To be a prophet is to lay down one’s life for the truth. The crowd, however, continues to resist: “But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 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.” (Acts 7:57-58). They cover their ears. They grind their teeth. Those are remarkably powerful gestures and expressions. In what way do we cover our ears about the things we do not want to hear, to learn from history, and from our own times? Why do we grind our teeth? In what way do we resist the Holy Spirit? An argument can be perfectly logical in form, but if anyone of its premises is invalid, then the argument is invalid. Saul was on the side of justice, but he was also completely wrong. Stephen seemed to be a blasphemer, if not a madman, but he was right. I know we do not like to think in a binary fashion anymore, but there is a big difference between stoning and not stoning, between what is true and what is false, between faith and unbelief, between judgment and mercy, between seeing Christ or not seeing Christ. Saul would later come to realize that he was wrong on the road to Damascus. On that road Saul met the very same Risen Christ that Stephen had seen just before dying. Our story invites us to consider what things in our lives seem just, logical, righteous in form, but might be seriously deficient or invalid. What things do we think we understand but utterly fail to comprehend because we do not see what will happen next after the stones have been cast, after coats have been collected, after everyone has gone home, leaving a battered corpse alone in the dust? What things seem blasphemous and unjust, but in reality are not? Paul would later have to change his way of looking at life, at history, at scripture, at the world—all because of Jesus.

The stone heap can become our place of prayer. Philosophers often speak of philosophy as learning how to live or how to die. In Christ, they are one and the same thing. The apostle Paul, the same man who approved of the stoning of Stephen, later gave his life for Christ, and would one day write: “To live is Christ, to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). There are two things that Stephen prays that say much about how we can live our lives as prayers to God. The first prayer is: “‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’” (Acts 7:59). Most of our discourse about conversion is about receiving Jesus, and this is scriptural: ““Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (Mark 9:37); “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23); “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). These scriptures speak of a spiritual hospitality that gives birth to faith. When we think of the Jesus’ discourse on the narrow way (Matthew 7), the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) or the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24), however, we might think of it from the viewpoint of God. God wants to receive us—but do we want God to receive us? Can we come to our senses and make our way home to the loving Father waiting by the roadside? Can we respond to the wedding invitation instead of letting life get in the way? As Jesus told his followers: “Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’” (Luke 14:16-20). Is there a desire in our hearts to really live for Jesus, please Jesus, and hope to be received by Jesus? Where is my heart today?

The second thing that the first martyr prays in the whirlwind of stones is: “‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’” (Acts 7:54-60). The stone heap may be a natural place for the person of faith. Though Stephen had preached a hard, accusatory sermon, he nevertheless loved the people he addressed—he wanted them to be forgiven and to know the love of God: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” This is what Jesus prayed on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This is a prayer that does not seem to be prayed much anymore—especially among Christians of differing values. And yet, that is the heart that we should be bringing to history and to our world. Otherwise, we will be resisting the Holy Spirit, just like the people who stoned Stephen. Stephen could see what the others could not—that Christ could be born in all of them. When we first read this scripture, Saul looks like a terrible villain. In the following chapter, it only gets worse (Acts 8:1-3). If we read no further in the Acts of the Apostles, we would think that Saul should be written off as nothing more than a hateful human being, a man without any redeeming qualities. Nevertheless, Saul became the Apostle Paul, a man reborn from darkness, a man who shared his experience of Christ with others. As he later narrates in the Acts of the Apostles: “I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.’ I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The Lord answered, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’” (Acts 26:12-18). This is a radically changed human being, one we would fail to imagine when reading the 7th chapter of Acts. Our tendency is to view people according to categories—my brother, my sister, my father, my mother, my teacher, my colleague, my boss, my neighbour, my wife, my husband, my friend—and that is natural, of course, but it can also become unnatural when we attach our expectations to these labels, when we create what the ideal teacher, husband, sister, doctor, neighbour, colleague, or boss should be. Then we stop seeing human beings made in God’s image; we stop seeing people who can be transformed and transfigured by the love of Christ. Life will never provide the world we want nor the inhabitants we want. Instead, God has given us the world we can learn to love and the inhabitants we can learn to love. When we look at the world, can we see the possibility of the Risen Christ being born in the persecutor? When we see those who anger us with their beliefs or actions, can we see future apostles and witnesses of love? That is how Jesus sees humanity, and it is how Jesus wants us to see humanity. It might take a little imagination. Catherine of Siena, considered by many to be a saint, and one of the most powerful women in the 14th Century, started out as a Cinderella, in a family that bullied her to try to stop her from her vocation: “And as for their abasing her to the vile services of the house, that turned but little to the advantage of the enemy. For when she saw that her father and mother had appointed her to do all the works of drudgery in the kitchen and other places of the house, she never repined at it, but turned it all to her greater merit by this holy imagination. She had this conceit with herself that her father represented in the house our Saviour Christ; her mother, our Blessed Lady; her brethren, sisters, and others of the family, the apostles and disciples of Christ…And with this holy imagination she went up and down the house like a diligent Martha, and in her father, mother, and brethren, served Christ so cheerfully, and with such a glad heart, that the whole house had great wonder of it” (Augusta Theodosia Drane, *The History of St. Catherine of Siena and Her Companions,* London: Burns and Oates, 1880. 23-24). That is holy imagination indeed—that is praying forgiveness into the world.

In the stone heap of his final moments, Stephen wanted Jesus to receive his spirit, and he wanted Jesus to forgive the murderers who were throwing stones. And though surrounded by danger, hostility, and resistance, he was not alone, for he saw Jesus, standing at the right side of our heavenly Father. May we likewise live seeing the Risen Christ in our midst, with the hope and desire of truly seeing the Risen Christ when we are risen.