

A) INTRODUCTION

- As Jesus was returning to heaven at his ascension, he told his disciples: you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses...to the end of the earth
- today's readings speak of two kinds of witnessing to Jesus, witnessing to his death and resurrection
- we hear of the death of St Stephen, the first of a long line of martyrs
- and then Jesus speaks of the witness given by his disciples when they are truly seen to love one another

B) WITNESS OF STEPHEN

- we first hear of Stephen when a dispute arises in the church in Jerusalem between two groups of converts
- the dispute is about the fair distribution of welfare among the widows from each group
- so the apostles appoint seven deacons to look after the needy, while the Apostles concentrate on their task of preaching the Gospel
- among these seven Deacons is Stephen, a man full of faith who preaches in the name of Jesus and works wonders among the people
- but he arouses the enmity of members of various synagogues by his teachings and is denounced to the Jewish authorities for blasphemy
- He bravely witnesses to his faith in Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the Chief Priests and other Jewish leaders, and now he is given a glimpse into heaven itself.
- "I can see heaven thrown open, he said, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."
- This last statement is the one which brings about his death.
- It is an echo of the statement which Jesus made at his own trial: from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the Power of God.
- Stephen is acting as a witness to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven.

C) MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN

- There are further parallels between the trial of Jesus and the trial of Stephen.
- Both trials, before the Sanhedrin, were illegal and unjust.
- Jesus was led out of the city to be killed, while he forgave his killers and commended his soul to the Father.
- Stephen too was dragged out of the city to be stoned to death.
- He forgave his killers, and prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
- So the death of the martyr mirrors and repeats the death of Jesus.

- Stephen bore witness to him in his life of service, in his brave words before the Jewish leaders and, in the most eloquent way possible, by dying for him; the first of the disciples to do so.

D) THE WITNESS OF MUTUAL CHARITY

- But there is another kind of witness to Christ which believers are asked to give, and that is the love which unites them.

- Jesus speaks of this in the final part of his priestly prayer, spoken at the Last Supper, the night before he died, and which we heard in today's Gospel.

- After praying for the Apostles, Jesus prays for all those throughout the generations who will come to believe in him.

- He asks: May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you.

- That union which Jesus seeks for those who believe in him is the very same union which exists between God the Father and God the Son.

- A Christian reaches maturity when he or she has entered into a close and personal union with God, and is at the same time closely united with his or her brothers and sisters in the faith.

- That union or relationship of love with God is the basis of our love of one another.

- And our love of neighbour is the visible sign and test of how real our love for God is.

- Jesus prays: "may they be one as we are one".

- And he prays that that oneness may be a source of inspiration to those who do not yet believe:

- "May they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me, and that I have loved them as much as you have loved me."

- it is our love for one another which will show forth just how great is God's love for the world and how deep his desire that everyone should be saved.

- So during these next few days leading up to Pentecost, let us pray for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit in our own lives.

- May he pour God's love into our hearts once more, so that we may make that love visible to all by our practical love for one another.

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