

OPENING COLLECT

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

FIRST READING: Acts 7.55-60

Standing before the high priest and the council, 55 Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' 57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.

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. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' 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.

Or Gen.8.20-9.17

As we have seen each week, Easter is not just about Jesus being raised from the dead it is also, and importantly, about the new life, which is available to God's people; a life to be shared with all people! So, in our readings from Acts, we have seen the young church come into being because the good news was proclaimed. People came to belief and, having been baptised, joined in a new way of life. Thus the plan of God, which was, from the beginning, that his people would be a source of blessing to all (Genesis 12.3), now becomes effective. But the story of Stephen's death, which we touch on today, reminds us that it was not all plain sailing. Notice the parallels with the death of Jesus.

OR The Genesis passage continues the story of the flood.

SECOND READING: 1 Peter 2.2-10

2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight. 5 Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

6 For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

7 To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,' and 8 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 9 But you are a chosen

Not many will be asked to go that far for their faith. The death of Stephen, perhaps shows where, following the example of Jesus can lead, at its extreme. Some of the early followers of Christ, and even some today, sadly, were called on to make the final sacrifice, and they remain a challenging example to us of the need to grow in the Lord, and be ready for any eventuality. So, the Peter passage fits in well. The joy of Easter faith is important, but meeting the risen Christ was always linked to the commission to 'live the risen life', and draw others into the Kingdom: the building of the spiritual house (see Psalm 118.22), on a good foundation, and the development of a 'holy priesthood' (see Exodus 19.5-6). The reference to the prophet Hosea, v.10, clarifies this. Hosea, in the C.8th. B.C., was told by God to call his children 'not my people' and 'I will not have

race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Epistle continued:

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Gospel: John 14.1-14

Jesus said to his disciples: ¹ 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.'

⁵ Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶ Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' ⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰ Do you not believe

that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

mercy', to symbolise God's rejection of the

people. Yet, the prophet also knew that God's love is enduring (the Hebrew uses the lovely word *Hesed*, often translated 'steadfast love') and so he also looks ahead to the time of restoration by God (Hosea 2.23). Peter says that this moment is now here!

Although Jesus is speaking about the fulfilment of all things (the 'land' of many dwelling places) in the opening verses of this Gospel passage, the passage has more to say about the route to the final destination! The route is, of course, doing the will of the Father. As usual, in John's writing, the conversation goes on at two levels. How do we know the route asks Thomas, we do not know the final destination; we don't know where to look on the map! But Jesus is the route. If you want to know the Father get to know Jesus. But surely, says Philip, you need to show us the Father. To which Jesus replies, "Whoever has seen me has seen the father". So, the task of the disciple, the task of the church, in the risen life of the Kingdom, is obvious. Follow the example of Jesus, and you will "do the works that I do". We started from the resurrection, but we recognised that Easter is also about living the risen life in our day, and we have traced its development in Acts. The other side of the Ascension and Pentecost, the challenge of Acts continues and we must learn to live the good news of the love of God and tell of his longing for the salvation of all: we must 'show the Father' in our day. The final Collect for today says it all.

Post-Communion Collect

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life: grant us to walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth, **and to share his risen life**; who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. **Amen.**