Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Apr 16th 2013

"But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up…and saw the glory of God." (Acts 7::55)

Stephen was a deacon appointed by the apostles to care for the poor of Jerusalem. Along the way he became a man transformed. As we dwell nearer to those at the margins, our horizon shifts. Previously, we dreamt of life on a big stage. Someone gives us a push; how else would we stumble into the small places where most of the world dwells? The waves of anger that roll over us at the sight of injustice can knock us flat. We keep our balance only if our hearts grow bigger. Along the way, we awaken to the beauty of this world and those who struggle from day to day. Dreams alter as we learn how to love.

Stephen embraced the insurgent vision of the young Christian movement. Dragged into court, his strong words rattled the elders and shocked the bystanders. This man seemed to curse the ground on which they stood. It is not easy to hear those who call us to account and expose our hypocrisy. Troublemakers, their words are strident; they ask too much of us. They really don't belong. The mob drove Stephen from the city and stoned him to death.

People are divided into those who throw the stones and those crushed by oppression. This way of sorting overlooks most people's role as bystanders. Where am I as the stones fly past? Kierkegaard compared the pagan within Christianity unfavorably to the ancient pagans. In their heroic battles, the latter showed passion that Christians, absorbed in business, often lack.

Stephen looked up and felt the spirit: he was not abandoned. As he died, he begged God to forgive their sin. The memory of Stephen stayed with Saul. Stephen's prayer put down roots. If we do not hide our face, the witness of others will surely bring us back to life.

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