

Today we hear the tail end of Stephen's speech, which is the longest speech in the Acts of the Apostles. Let's look at a little background to gain some perspective.

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles to help meet the needs of the Church. The tradition puts forth that these men were deacons whose task was to meet the daily needs of the early Church.

We then hear that Stephen is filled with grace and power and was working wonders among the people. Some of the Jewish Greek speaking pilgrims from the diaspora who were in Jerusalem began to debate with Stephen. They accused Stephen of speaking against the Temple and the customs of Moses.

In turn, Stephen gives a long speech summarizing the history of Israel beginning with Abraham. Stephen begins on a point of agreement. God made promises to Abraham. He remained faithful to these promises through Moses and the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai.

However, in recounting their history, Stephen will point out that whereas God has been faithful to His promises, their ancestors were rebellious and rejected God and His prophets. This is where we pick up Stephen's speech today.

Stephen makes a brilliant move by saying that just as their ancestors resisted the Holy Spirit and persecuted the prophets, so the same is true now. They have put to death the righteous one and now they are persecuting those sent by Him. In doing so, they fail to keep the Law.

And just when things are heating up, Stephen throws gasoline on the fire by equating Jesus with the Son of Man, the figure in Daniel 7. Essentially, Stephen says that Jesus will be vindicated and administer justice. Unfortunately, this is the last straw. They stone Stephen and before he dies, he prays for his persecutors just as Jesus did.

We are then introduced to Saul, who will become the great apostle Paul. We assume that Paul has been listening to Stephen's speech. Much of Paul's theology and themes in his future letters will come from Stephen's speech.

Moreover, it may well be that Stephen's prayer won the grace of conversion for Saul. Saul witnesses the power of Christian forgiveness. Like Stephen, may we have the courage to proclaim the truth about Jesus and humbly and charitably pray for those who persecute us.