

## God sustains

- [Acts 7:55-60](#)
- [Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#)

During Eastertide our first readings are taken from the Book of Acts, which is an account of the growth of the early church in the first months and years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Last week we heard that those first believers in Jerusalem had the good will of all the people. Today's reading gives a very different picture. Stephen's preaching infuriated his audience so much that they lynched him.

It reminds me a bit of John the Baptizer. He was baptizing in the Jordan river, and people were coming out from Jerusalem to hear him preach. It was like a great tent revival. People went out of interest and curiosity and found their hearts strangely moved. John was the talk of the town. But then he preached against Herod Antipas because Herod had divorced his wife and married his sister-in-law. Herod arrested him and later beheaded him.

The gospel of Jesus the Christ is not an easy one. There are many things about living with Jesus which are attractive and engaging, but as we go further into the mysteries we realize that this path is deeply counter-cultural. We are challenged to live in a discipleship which the world does not always appreciate.

In a society which values competition, social and financial success, a constantly higher standard of living, and the derision and hatred of those who are different, we, my friends, are called to be the household of faith, a royal priesthood which worships a God who was a failure, who lived in poverty, was a friend to anyone who would accept his friendship and who called out hypocrisy and self-serving behavior.

Most of us grew up with the cross as a central symbol of our faith, many of us the crucifix with its figured of a suffering, dying man and so we have lost sight of really how bizarre it is. Our society worships the billionaire, the manipulator and asks how we too can get a bigger house, a more luxury car, greater prestige. We worship the guy who failed. The one who was a great preacher and talked and practiced the way of love but was killed for his ideas and for the mirror he held up to the religious rulers. John the Baptizer, Jesus, Stephen – all killed for speaking truth to power.

This is very different from the pervasive philosophy that if we stay in the ‘zone’ we will be rewarded -that if we live right things will go well for us. There is a strong Biblical voice that suggests this – it is most evident in the First Testament book of Deuteronomy, where we are told over and over that this king served God and everything went well, but this other king went after other gods and the result was disaster. But when we read scripture as a whole we can see that this is only a partial truth. Job served God and ended up with his family and farm devastated by disaster and a very nasty skin infection. Jesus served God and was nailed to a cross.

I confess that I often get drawn in by the ‘serve God, be good and pray hard and everything you do will be successful’ philosophy. But this is a distortion of the Christian faith. It simply isn’t true. And if we preach this false gospel then when people realize it isn’t true they will be disillusioned and think that God has let them down, or that they are being punished for some bad behavior in their past.

That, my friends, is not the God whom we serve and love. Our God does not punish us. Yes I know that that is how many of the ancient prophets understood it, but **we** look at the scriptural witness through the lens of Jesus, and we see a God of unconditional love and forgiveness who is always willing to work with us, always willing to welcome us home. And who, at the same time, calls us and challenges us to newness of life.

Please turn with me to the psalm we read together a few minutes ago.  
Let's read it again together:

In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge;  
let me never be put to shame; \*  
deliver me in your righteousness.

Incline your ear to me; \*  
make haste to deliver me.

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,  
for you are my crag and my stronghold; \*  
for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.

Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, \*  
for you are my tower of strength.

Into your hands I commend my spirit, \*  
for you have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth.

My times are in your hand; \*  
rescue me from the hand of my enemies,  
and from those who persecute me.

Make your face to shine upon your servant, \*  
and in your loving-kindness save me.

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

This is a prayer for safety and deliverance. It is one that most of us have used, in our own words, many times and no doubt will again in the future.

I want to draw your attention to the fifth stanza. "Into your hands I commend my spirit." This is a turning point. Before that, the psalmist is asking for help from the God who is their strong rock, castle and stronghold. But then they put themselves into God's hands in profound surrender. "into your hand I commend my spirit... my times are in your hand...make your face to shine upon your servant..."

It is when we commit ourselves entirely to God, throwing ourselves with abandon into her hands, that we find our safety. It may be that someone has set a net secretly, or that, like Stephen, someone is showering us with hatred, or it may just be that life is often contrary and painful stuff happens, but what makes a difference, what shifts the psalmist from pleading to the confidence that “you have redeemed me o God” is that act of surrender.

This is different from the dominant philosophy of do right and you will be rewarded; this is the gospel that we see in Jesus – surrender your life to God and you will be resurrected. In the reading from Acts we heard that Stephen had a very painful death but whereas the crowd went away filled with bitter hatred, he “saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” He saw this before he died. God made God’s face to shine upon him and in God’s loving kindness saved him.

God does not necessarily save us from pain and difficulty but as we put all things into God’s hands, God sustains us and brings new life. God is always there sustaining us and it is this which gives us hope, it is this which gives us the courage to get up in the morning and keep going.

This is a difficult time in the life of St. Benedict’s as we go through this time of change. I have been preaching, celebrating and serving here for the last 17 years. Most of you do not remember a time when I was not here pretty much every week. You associate the faith community with me because I have been the most visible entryway for God’s grace. I make that association myself – yesterday after I introduced myself someone heard “Carol” and mistook me for Carrol Leslie at Volumes of Pleasure. “Oh no,” I said, “I’m Caro, the Episcopal Church.”

I am deeply sad that the time has come for our paths to part.

But I know that God is sustaining me. And I know that God is sustaining this faith community as well. God's grace in this place and in your lives is not dependent on me, anymore than God's grace in my and Jill's life is dependent on my being your priest. Things will be different for us. Life may be painful when I don't get to see your loving faces looking back at me in the mornings and we don't share bread and wine together, and you don't get to pick up the phone to discuss something with me.

But our hope is not in anyone who is only human; our hope and our trust is in the man-God Jesus who went through the worst we could do to him and came back to love us even more. Our hope is in the God who brings resurrection through even the greatest disaster.

And so we can pray with the psalmist that prayer of commitment, faith and hope:

Into your hands we commend our spirits, \*  
for you have redeemed us, Holy One, O God of truth.  
Our times are in your hand; \*  
rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and from those who persecute us  
Make your face to shine upon your servants, \*  
and in your loving-kindness save us.