

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Why Stephen Was Martyred**     Feast of St. Stephen, deacon, martyr     Friday,  
December 26, 2014     8:15 AM     **Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59;**     Mt 10:17-22     (A debate that  
became a confrontation)

Unfortunately **the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is abbreviated**; the middle section has been taken out. **“When they heard this, they were infuriated,” but when they heard what? That was taken out.**

It starts off that **Stephen who was a young and very intelligent man debated the open-minded Jewish scholars and people**, the educated people of his day, and there were people especially from outside of Judea who were more or less what you might call cosmopolitan. They were from Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as Cilicia and Asia. Asia means Turkey, modern-day Turkey. Some people call it Asia Minor, Cappadocia, Anatolia; it has lots of different names. Anyway these very open-minded people, educated people, were into debating. And there is a level on which we can debate all kinds of things about God and about truth and about wisdom. **But it went up another level because at one point they actually took him, arrested him, dragged him to the Sanhedrin.**

Now this is no longer a debate. This is **accusing him you could say of heresy**, although they didn't use that word. **So the open-mindedness part was over** and now he is taken to the Sanhedrin and he is being accused, falsely it says, of saying terrible things. Actually what they said was simply a misunderstanding of what Jesus said. For example, they claimed that he said that Jesus would come and destroy the Temple. Well, he didn't exactly say that. He said the Temple would be destroyed, not that he would do it. He didn't say that. And that he would raise it up again, but of course that's a metaphor about his own resurrection, so, again, a misunderstanding of what he said and what he meant. And **there are various other charges, all a slight distortion of what Jesus actually taught and surely taken out of their right context.**

But this is the problem: **open-mindedness is really very difficult.** True open-mindedness means you are really open. And that's the problem here; **they really weren't open.** They were open only insofar as they thought, well, we can just debate people and have fun or even prove how smart we are. But **they were no match for Stephen because Stephen wasn't**

**speaking for himself. The Holy Spirit was speaking through him.** Once they realized they were no match, the game was over. They were not about to submit to a higher authority, in this case the Holy Spirit. Furthermore if they had done so, **they would have had to completely change their way of living, and this just became too threatening.**

So they dragged him before the Sanhedrin with these false accusations and the Sanhedrin says, well, is this true? Well, **Stephen** doesn't answer the question, is this true? He takes off after the Sanhedrin. He says, **you have always persecuted the Holy Spirit.** When the Holy Spirit sent prophets to you, you persecuted them, and you are still doing the same thing. Well, this is not a debate anymore. Now this has become a real confrontation.

**Now why did the Holy Spirit choose this sort of battleground when the only viable, possible end of it was Stephen's martyrdom?** I cannot answer that. But apparently **Stephen was quite ready and quite willing to let go of his life on earth in witness to Christ.** And there was a rather remarkable moment where he simply looked up and saw some sort of heavenly vision. After that these men dragged him out and stoned him. It says that they were "stung to the heart." And that's a very important phrase because **when the Holy Spirit stings the heart, it's really a sign, it's really an invitation to a deep change, a profound conversion.** It's actually enabling a profound conversion. But again, **we are free to turn away from this great opportunity to change.** And that's sadly what we see in today's story.