

“The king of love is dead”

The 5th Sunday of Easter, April 20, 2008

THIS MORNING'S STORY OF STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

This morning's story of the martyrdom of Stephen is set in the first decades of the church.

Luke tells us it was a time when the followers of Jesus were increasing by leaps and bounds.

And Stephen, we're told, was doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them.

But there was trouble in paradise, trouble between the Greek-speaking believers, and the Hebrew-speaking believers.

Some of those Greek-speakers from the synagogue were no match for the wisdom and spirit within Stephen.

So what they did was bribe witnesses to lie.

"We heard him cursing Moses and God," they said.

That stirred up the religious leaders and the scholars.

They grabbed Stephen and took him before the High Council.

The bribed witnesses testified.

The Chief Priest asked Stephen what he had to say for himself.

Stephen replied with what actually amounted to a very long sermon about God's former relationship with the Jews and now...

God's relationship with those first Christians.

At the end, Stephen, we're told...

condemned his accusers, called them traitors and murderers.

And that's the point at which this morning's reading takes up.

The crowd went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and expletives.

But Stephen, full of God's spirit, hardly noticed.

He only had eyes for God, whom he could see...

God in all God's glory...

with Jesus standing at God's side.

Yelling and hissing, the mob overwhelmed him.

They dragged him out of town.

Forgetting order and reason, they threw rocks at the skull of their opponent.

They smashed Stephen's brain, the center of language...

Stephen's brain, the center of reason.

They smashed Stephen's brain...

the center of faith.

They smashed it with stones...

they smashed at what they could no longer tolerate.

Stephen prayed his way through it all.

"Master Jesus, take my life.."

"Master, don't blame them for this sin."

Those were his last words.

Then he died.

The first Christian martyr.

Clearly, Christians identify Stephen with the suffering and punishment of Jesus.

Jesus endured a similar irrational violence, an innocent but entirely faithful person.

Stephen died the same way...

died like Jesus, His last words of forgiveness, and commending his spirit to God, clearly echo the last words of Jesus.

THE MARTYRDOM OF MARTIN LUTHER KING

It's interesting that this story comes up just days after the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination in Memphis...

Martin Luther King...

a modern-day Christian martyr.

King also spoke truth in a way that often invoked blind rage against him as well, and even rejection from within the Christian community.

He spoke truth in a way that unfortunately resulted in his death as well.

They had to kill what they could no longer tolerate.

Again, a death of an innocent but entirely faithful person.

GENE ROBINSON

Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson could be next.

There's a possibility that his life is in jeopardy.

At his consecration ceremony, he had to wear a bullet-proof vest.

There was a serious possibility that he might become yet another martyr in our lifetimes.

Still is a possibility.

Gene Robinson has written a new memoir called *In the Eye of the Storm*.

It's about his experience as the first openly gay bishop in the entire Anglican Communion.

If you've been following news, you know that he has been denied a seat at the once-every-decade Lambeth conference of all of the worldwide bishops...

all but one this time.

Gene Robinson has been denied a seat there, the only duly elected and consecrated bishop in the Anglican Communion anywhere who is not being invited.

He's going anyway, but he'll be staying on the sidelines, available to talk with anyone who wishes to talk with him, but on the outside looking in.

He was interviewed this past week on the PBS program, *Fresh Air*.

Terry Gross...

the interviewer...

recalled his wearing that bullet-proof vest at his consecration...

and she asked him if security would surround him at Lambeth.

He said yes.

He will have security with him.

Too risky to be there without it.

Gene Robinson knows that what he's doing is dangerous work.

He's aware of that.

But like Stephen...

and I expect like Martin Luther King...

he also recognizes that one of the great joys about faith in God, and walking in this path with God, is that you don't have to be fearful, and if there is any great reward to the Christian life, or the life of faith in any religion that knows God, the reward is that you don't have to be paralyzed by your fear.

Jesus always said that life in him would be costly.

And for Bishop Robinson it means that his speaking out has taken an enormous toll on him and his family.

However, in the end...

he says, having the opportunity to do what God has called him to do is just plain awesome.

THE VOICE OF GENE ROBINSON

With stones...

they smashed Stephen's brain, the center of language, reason, and faith.

He died like Jesus.

They shot Martin Luther King, hoping to extinguish what they could not tolerate.

He died like Jesus.

Bishop Gene Robinson is apparently also vulnerable, but willing to die like Jesus.

WHY? THE KING OF LOVE IS DEAD

Three days after King's assassination in 1968, performer Nina Simone and her band played at the Westbury Music Festival on Long Island.

They presented a song called "Why?"

Its subtitle is "The King of Love is Dead."

It's a powerful song about the contemptible killing of Martin Luther King...

but clearly...

it's also about Jesus.

It's about the brutal killing of Stephen, and it's about the vulnerability of Bishop Gene Robinson and others like him.

I have, loaded in my iPod, about one minute of the Gene Robinson interview from Public Radio.

That minute is followed by a five-minute version of the Nina Simone song, "Why?"

I'm going to play that piece of the interview...

and the song...

for you...

and I want you to listen for images of not only Martin Luther King...

but also Stephen...

Gene Robinson...

and Jesus.

They're all there!

I've typed up the recorded words of Bishop Robinson and the lyrics from the Nina Simone song.

Follow along, if you'd like.

They're tucked into your service booklet.

I'll start the playlist, and then I'll sit down.

STEPHEN, MARTIN LUTHER KING, GENE ROBINSON, AND JESUS

Stephen, we're told, was doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them.

So was Martin Luther King...

and so is Bishop Gene Robinson...

just like Jesus.

Something we know...

I think...

is that the King of Love did not die after all.

We'll follow up with the creed.

BISHOP ROBINSON'S WORDS

If I can perhaps even risk my own life, but certainly risk whatever angry and hateful words that might come my way, to sit at the table and engage those who might disagree with me, if I can do that, certainly these conservative bishops can come to the table and remain engaged with me and with one another around the issues that face us. We just cannot write off a fellow brother or sister and it argues for a kind of doctrinal purity that has never been the tradition of the Anglican Church. And so for these people to call themselves traditionalists is really a misnomer. And to walk away from the table is the most unfaithful act of all because it says that reconciliation isn't possible.

WHY? (THE KING OF LOVE IS DEAD): BY GENE TAYLOR & RECORDED BY NINA SIMONE (1968)

*Once upon this planet earth, lived a man humble birth
Preaching love and freedom for his fellow man
He was dreaming of the day, peace would come to
Earth to stay, and he spread this message all across the
land., Turn the other cheek, he plead, Love thy
neighbor was his creed, pain, humiliation, death he
did not dread, With his mother at his side, from his
foes he did not hide, It's hard to think this great man is
dead., Will the murders never cease, are they men or
are they beasts, What do they ever hope, ever hope to
gain, Will my country stand or fall , Is it too late for
us all, And did Martin Luther King , just die in vain.,
He has seen the Mountain Top, and he knew he could
not stop., Always living, with the threat of death
ahead, Folks you better stop and think, 'cause we're
headed for the brink, what will happen now, that he is
dead., He was for equality, for all people, you and me,
full of love and goodwill, hate was not his way, he
was not a violent man, tell me folks if you can, just
why, why was he shot down the other day, But he'd
seen the mountain top, and he knew he could not stop,
always living with a threat of death ahead, Folks you
better stop and think, and feel again, while we're
headed for the brink , what's going to happen, now
that the king of love is dead.*