

**The Sunday Missive – May 7, 2023**  
**The Fifth Sunday of Easter**

**Hymn 304 – I come with joy to meet my Lord**

I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved, and free,  
In awe and wonder to recall his life laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near to find, as all are fed,  
The new community of love in Christ's communion bread.

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends.  
The love that made us makes us one, and strangers now are friends.

And thus with joy we meet our Lord. His presence, always near,  
Is in such friendship better known: we see and praise him here.

Together met, together bound, we'll go our different ways  
And as his people in the world we'll live and speak his praise.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRi49fLDvM>

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

**The Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## **The First Lesson Acts 7:55-60**

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

## **Psalm 31**

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 hands\* 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.

## **The Second Lesson 1 Peter 2:2-10**

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner”, and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

### **Hymn 204 Now the green blade riseth**

Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,  
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;  
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.

In the grave they laid him, love whom men had slain,  
Thinking that never he would wake again.  
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green,

Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,  
He that for three days in the grave had lain.  
Quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,  
Thy touch can call us back to life again;  
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVduV0ustWw>

## **John 14:1-14**

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

## **Easter 5A – Attaining Royalty**

One of the Church's traditions is to suspend the reading of passages from the Hebrew Bible during the Easter season. Instead, each Sunday, our first lesson is taken from The Acts of the Apostles. The wisdom of this practice is open to question, but endeavour we must to make the most of what we're offered. In today's story, Stephen sees visions of Christ and is stoned for his trouble. The violence is terrible; sadly in places near and far, it continues to this day. Just as Jesus did, Stephen prays forgives his murderers before he dies, which is hard to imagine, but fully attested.

Just like last week, one message the story conveys is that we must suffer for what is right. This idea is problematic to say the least. Why do we tell these stories? Just as Paul says, "No, do not go out and see how much you can sin, just so you can see how much forgiveness there is," likewise nobody who was at all interested in the sustainability of human existence would interpret this as a call to go out and see how much you can suffer, just so you can find the most relief on the other side of the Jordan.

Suffering can become a compulsion. You've heard the one about the overbearingly long-suffering mother who buys her son two shirts for his birthday, a red one and a blue one. He comes down to breakfast proudly sporting the red one and she says, "What, you didn't like the blue one?" "Mom! You'll ruin your eyes trying to read like that!" "It's ok, I'll sit in the dark..." Et cetera. Suffering for its own sake is nothing less than the denial of love.

However, if we think about the people we have met whose lives are particularly admirable, there does seem to be a pattern. In one way or another, they have all been through some kind of death, whether of a loved one, a way of life or a fixed point of view. Their wisdom and virtue has been acquired by moving – falteringly or faithfully; boldly or timidly – through life, rather than skipping over its waves. At one time or another, they ran out of earthly and/or emotional resources, and that full stop became a beginning of their next and fuller self. Whether or not it was in a religious context, faith became their foundation and death lost its power.

My grandmother Jane was like this; my mother's mom. She's the one who paid us a dime for memorizing Bible verses when we were little, and even into her 90's, when dementia had all but overtaken her daily life, delivered poetic and mystically powerful blessings at our Sunday dinners. In every two decades of her long life, she lost the most significant man in her life. Her father, a doctor was murdered by disgruntled relatives of a deceased patient before she was 20. Her first-born child died at 9. Her brother, who practiced radiology before it was known to be dangerous, quickly developed cancer before she was 60. Her husband, my beloved grandfather succumbed to a brain tumor before she was 80, and her son, my mother's younger brother died of a heart attack not long after. Yet through all of this, she remained our spiritual leader, fully assured of the beauty of the world and the peace and joy available to her and the rest of us.

No, we are not being called to go out and see how much we can suffer. If we were, it would make all kinds of sense not to answer that call. But we are being called to pay attention to what is good and right, charitable and just, truthful and equitable, and to prepare ourselves for suffering in bringing about a world where such values prevail. Sometimes that suffering will be in the one sense: pain and grief and even deadly struggle against evil. Sometimes it will be in the other sense: forbearance, listening, making room for others to live decently, openness to change.

Psalm 31 talks about God as "My crag, I hide in you; into your hands I commend my spirit, for you take me out of the secret net my enemies have prepared for me. Well certainly from Stephen's point of view these are metaphorical images, spiritual deliverance from spiritual and psychological enemies; because physically, he's under a pile of rocks. The fortress of which the psalmist speaks, the heart's home we seek, whose impenetrability and peace surpass all of the worries of the world is only reachable through the world, not by going around it. For Stephen, it meant a painful end to his earthly life, and the opportunity to forgive the seemingly unforgiveable. For us it might mean only a – reluctant? – letting go of whatever makes us feel entitled, superior and disinclined to the compassionate encouragement and care of all Creation.

Peter, in his letter would have us believe that, in following that suggestion, we become “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; God’s own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called us out of darkness into marvellous light.” And thus we will have created a new history for ourselves: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Today, these characterizations seem overblown, exclusive, even arrogant. But this is because we have been looking at Jesus and his movement through the eyes of organized religion for the better part of two millennia. Peter is not talking about being religious or pious; neither was Stephen. They’re encouraging us to try being good. The promise is, if we try to be good, we are likely to be well. Perfect adherence to all of God’s suggestions is a long way off for most of us, but each of us has a will that can be directed towards justice, humility and mercy. Each of us has a face that can be turned towards the light of charity and peace.

Talking about attaining chosen-ness, royalty, holiness and access to might and marvel these days sounds like the worst of what’s wrong in our world, fantasies and rhetoric from the all-too-vocal and powerful extremists among us. Either that or a movie. But Peter’s viewpoint was that of an oppressed and vilified disciple of the crucified Jesus. His activities were outlawed and Peter’s own violent death were imminent. So, like Stephen, his kingdom was very much, “to come.”

For us and for our salvation, it is important to absorb and relish these metaphors – chosen-ness, holiness, royalty, might – the way we relish a perfect peach in season. We revel in its sensational colours, flavour, textures and scent; we make it our own and we share it with others, laughing as the juice drips down our chins. But we take no credit for its perfection; neither do we kid ourselves that we can match its splendour with our virtue. Again, decency, forbearance, open-mindedness, kindness can be our only royal traits and holy pursuits. Then, if there is to be civilization, those who have tried to live this way will surely be its cornerstones.

## **Hymn 645 The King of love my shepherd is**

The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine for ever.

Where streams of living water flow, my ransomed soul he leadeth,  
And where the verdant pastures grow, with food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, but yet in love he sought me,  
And on his shoulder gently laid, and home, rejoicing, brought me.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill with thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
Thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight; thy unction grace bestoweth;  
And oh, what transport of delight from thy pure chalice floweth!

And so through all the length of days thy goodness faileth never:  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house for ever.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d50KE9jMVWY>

## **LXV [Once, I knew a fine song]**

Once, I knew a fine song,  
—It is true, believe me,—  
It was all of birds,  
And I held them in a basket;  
When I opened the wicket,  
Heavens! They all flew away.  
I cried, “Come back, little thoughts!”  
But they only laughed.  
They flew on  
Until they were as sand  
Thrown between me and the sky.

Stephen Crane