

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr  
December 26, 1993

Texts: II Chron. 24:17-22  
Psalm 17, Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60  
Mat. 23:34-39.

The Martyrs are the Seeds of the Church

Perhaps a fitting passage from Scripture that puts the thought for today into a nutshell comes from Romans 12:1.

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto the Lord, which is your spiritual worship.

No longer are we primitive and offer animal sacrifices. We also no longer need scapegoats. Christmas brings home to us spiritual worship. That means self-giving, a self-giving that confronts this world. How can this brutal story have anything to do with Christmas? you might ask. We just celebrated the birth of the Holy Child, and now we are right in the middle of rather ugly human stories. A king has Zechariah stoned because he spoke the truth to power. Self-righteous religious people blow all the commandments, who hooked in anger, drag Stephen out of the city, and stone him. Jesus is of course the first fruits. He shakes his head over the people of Jerusalem and says these sad words of the gospel lesson over them just before they crucify him.

What we have here is an offering. An offering of those willing to plant their bodies in the dirt, to lay down their lives, and die to the old world, so that their bodies become the seed for the new world. That they rise up and bear much fruit.

We planted several sunflower seeds quite late this summer, but we planted them. Then the beautiful flowers grew, and we succeeded in getting two really large ones. And as we were taking

the thousands of seeds out of one of the heads of the sunflower we stopped and I asked my little sons: "Do you remember how each of these little delicate plants pushed themselves out of the ground? They were so small they came up with their little seed-shells like a cap on their heads. And they grew up into this glorious sunflower. And one seed produced thousands of other seeds to salt and feed us and snack on and with plenty to spare to plant new seeds all over again.

When we offer our lives, then life and life more abundant will become, a glorious harvest. And Christmas is the story of God almighty sending his son to earth to be a seed, like a red, red, rose, that's gently born in spring.<sup>1</sup> The fact that it is in the middle of winter, means nothing. That God planted this rose makes it spring. A springtime of the planting of the children of God. This is the rose that gives us the rose environment, the rose climate, the rose weather, the springtime of the planting of the children of God, the first seed planted here in Bethlehem, born that He might die for us. Come to taste our bitter death, to take the sting out of it, to remove the thorn from the bush, that our lives might reenter the lovely garden, the holy city, where feelings of love and compassion, and mutual faithfulness and support flow for each other, right out of the storehouse of all the heavenly gifts, which God has wrapped up for all who love Him.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Burns: "My luvie is like a red, red rose  
that's newly sprung in June...."

So we are talking not about the gardening seasons. We are not talking about the weather. We are talking about moral climate of a people. We are talking about what brings an out pouring of gifts of life, faith, an engendering of the extraordinary people that are an offering for the to God, who lay down their lives, who live a life of self-giving, which is spiritual worship.

And that seems to provoke the radical wintry evil among us to come out and rear its head. But in the face of this monstrous and violent evil, the chosen of God, born of the will of God, born like bread for the eating of the hungry, like food in the trough of a manger, these are chewed up by the evil. And while they are bleeding to death, they pronounce the forgiveness. Zechariah was old Testament. Jesus says forgive them, they know not what they do. Stephen says, Father do not take this sin against them. And thereby he makes grace available even to his murderers. And a young man, at whose feet all the coats of the enraged mob were placed, who was fully in accord with the execution of this blasphemer, the young man who watched was named Saul. And although everything in Saul was against this new sect that was following Jesus, although he would not stand for someone who chose love over holy and time worn traditions, that martyr was a seed planted in his heart. And the little plant came up with the shell on it like a cap (like our sunflower). And Christ pounced upon him on the road to Damascus, and he changed from a persecutor and torturer into a gentle suffering servant of God. A valiant strongman against the forces and powers of darkness. And

he was named Paul, meaning the little bit. Where he had been named after Saul, the tall king, who was one cubit taller than any of the other men of Israel. Now he was the little one for Christ, who became the Apostle, bringing in thousands of people into the marvelous reign of Christ his Lord.

Hopefully you have been able to follow me. Our spiritual worship means that you and I need to become Christmas gifts. A steady and faithful blessing to others even while we are being killed each day, and recognized like sheep for the slaughter. Like roses cut from the plant, and gracing everyone with beauty, elegance and fragrance while their dying is at hand. And in a spirit of great rejoicing. Who would be so tasteless as to count the cost? That cost, more precious than winning 45 million dollars in the lottery has been paid by Jesus Christ, our Lord. Because what can be compared to giving one's life for others in love? Before that offering all the money in wheelbarrow loads comes to nothing. And when this rose blooms, a new atmosphere radiates from it, like that luxurious perfume from a bouquet of roses. A whole new springtime of love and righteousness comes out of this flower and engulfs us all. It is a springtime that makes for the growing of a wonderful garden, and surrounding the garden a holy city. And in that city is a stream of love and grace which makes glad the city of our God. Because God, behold, lying in a manger, an animals' food trough, is there in the midst of her. And in the city of Bethlehem, which means house of bread, or bakery, there is a heavenly bread like baked out of sunflower

seeds, to feed the masses of the world, the one who is a living sacrifice, who will seal that love with his very own blood, spilled in rose-drops for you and for me on that cross.

And from the cradle to the cross, we count it all joy. It's a life of the power of the forgiveness of sins. It's a life that takes the most radical evil, like picking up a snake, and taking the poison out of the fangs, and finding the snake turn into a creature that glorifies and praises God from the holy ground upon which it crawls, all the more loving, because of its constant hugging of the earth.

Seasons So the seasons roll around, spring into winter, summer into fall. And I know it is winter into spring. But Christmas is a winter that is overcome by a springtime that enters into it and overcomes it's coldness with the warm and tropical sunshine of God's own love. And it's this Christmas season we are after. What does Christmas mean? A mass of Christ's. A mass is worship. It is the worship that Christ practices. It is spiritual worship. It worships God in the midst of all the evils, faithlessness, broken relationships, and violence, and sin, and darkness of ignorance and hate that we in the world walk in. And then dying to that, being born anew to die to that, we become those who become Christmas gifts. Like Stephen, like Zechariah, like all the little christs in Christ, Oscar Romero, the six Jesuits of El Salvador, Paul and Peter, James and John, Michael Stuckey, the fellow just knifed who saved Susan Sloan, who was being mugged near the cable cars in S.F., the reporters who kept their cameras

fixed on the crimes of the powerful, who paid for their witness with their lives. I'm thinking of Koos Kooster and his three fellow reporters in El Salvador.

But the Christmas season is powerfully full of witnesses. What a Christmas, a spiritual worship was demonstrated to us by the Petaluma community. They got together. Forget the mere missing children on milk bottles! They got to the bottom of Polly's disappearance and brought the radical evil of a psychopath to light for all the world to see and shun. They uprooted that person and have put him into a space where he can no longer do any harm. And they have the Pollypower to continue Christmas. And perhaps Polly may inspire us to put an end to violent crime in our midst. Enough is enough!

Just look at 20/20 on TV. They showed the Rumanian children who received happy homes. I watched that on Christmas eve with tears streaming down my face. The children were in pens like chickens. They looked like they were in a concentration camp. They were being hosed down like animals. Those dogged reporters got in there, took pictures of those children that had been thrown away by the ugliness of the cold winters of the heart, and the children have been taken into homes and changed into the children they were created by God to be. The one with a club foot, received an operation, and was running just as sweetly as can be. And the proud father was asked: Well, what are your plans? Well, I want to send him to Harvard!

We need to glorify God, because our reporters are real

witnesses we need to honor. And we need to take the example of these reporters and produce the springtime that thaws out the deepest winter in the hearts of the old godless and forsaken, bitter and cruel people here on earth.

And it is done by spiritual worship. By the worship of Christ. By Christ's mass.

Our funds were not very plentiful this year. We left some double income salaries in Brooklyn for me to get a PhD. So it was tight. Lo and behold, suddenly my sisters and brothers sent us hundreds of dollars, and I rushed out on Christmas eve and bought my wife and children some presents. Of course we had way too much - but I needed to share, and it is rough to share without money. But I had written another real strong interpretation of Christmas, and a family letter. The real point is to get into this Christ worship, this church service of Christ right out in the world and make that Christmas happen that brings us all to our knees around that old rugged food trough, we call a manger. Amen.

Christmas is not a season, but the condition that our souls are in. It is the quality of life enhanced by love and forgiveness and a favor of God that we can bask in, as if we were flooded by warm tropical sunshine. Christmas is the seed planting which bodes the promise of a wonderful harvest. The people are really different around Christmas. There is an outpouring of faith and love and common attempt to reach out to the needy. But there is a grace by which we proclaim that this is but a beginning. The Christmas rose will blossom and grow that 10,000 christmases will engulf the earth in a new birth of grace. Amen.