

Year A, Easter 5  
Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
April 20, 2008  
The Rev. John Spicer

### **The Witness of a Rum Punch**

We might be forgiven if we find that first reading today a little confusing. Basically, we're walking into an execution without knowing much about the case. The condemned man is Stephen, remembered in the Church as the first deacon and, as we hear today, the first martyr. Stephen is dragged before the religious authorities because of the "great wonders and signs" he performed in Jesus' name (Acts 6:8). When he's given his chance to defend himself, Stephen instead goes into a long discourse on salvation history, telling the story of God's saving work and indicting the religious leaders for killing the messiah sent to complete their salvation. It probably wasn't the legal strategy that a good defense attorney would have chosen: Stephen's testimony gets him stoned to death. But what we remember about Stephen is his faithfulness and courageous action in bearing witness to God's saving work and in speaking prophetic truth about the world around him.

Now, this story may not seem to connect with us very directly. None of us is going to be dragged before the authorities because of our ministry in the world. None of us is being called to lose our lives because of our faith and work in the name of Christ.

Or are we? I guess it depends on whose life we see ourselves living. Are we our own? Or does somebody else have a claim on us?

Our second reading today answers that question pretty clearly. This reading from First Peter picks up where we left off last week, when we heard that we, like Christ, have been "born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed" (1:23). That new life comes from our baptisms, from dying to our old selves and rising again to share in Christ's life of resurrection.

Well today, we hear what that new life means for us. No longer are we simply creatures of the world, living for ourselves and following the world's rules. We have been transformed into "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). What God does in the world, God chooses to do mostly through you and me – despite how frightening that thought may be. And as "God's own people," we have a commission, the reading tells us: to "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light" (2:9).

Every time we witness a baptism and renew our Baptismal Covenant, we remind ourselves of what comes with being raised into new life: We promise to "proclaim, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ" (*Book of Common Prayer* 305). And in practice, that looks remarkably like the example of Stephen, the first deacon and martyr. As God's own people, we're called to proclaim God's saving work, to speak the truth about what God desires

for creation, and to act in ways that bring about healing in the world around us. As God's own people, we're each called to be witnesses, prophets, and agents of Good News.

Well, that's great. But what does it mean for us right now? How might God be calling us to live as God's own people *this week*?

Here's one way, though it's certainly not the only one. We've been hearing a lot in the news recently about hunger – hunger that's gripping the poorest countries of the world because of food shortages and price increases. It's a problem that's struck very close to home, in our nation's own backyard – in Haiti. At least six people have been killed in food riots in Haiti; stores have been looted; food warehouses have been raided; barricades have been burned in the streets. The poorest of the poor are literally eating dirt – patties made of mud, oil, and sugar. Food prices have risen by 45 percent globally in the last year and a half, in some cases by as much as 100 percent. In Haiti, a daily ration of rice that used to cost 40 cents now costs 80 cents. Our own missionaries, back from a trip there a few weeks ago, report that an awful, scrawny chicken that none of us would buy now sells in a Haitian market for \$4, and one gallon of gas now costs \$7. If you only earn a dollar or two a day (assuming you're lucky enough to have a job), then price increases like this lead you to rioting because you simply can't afford to feed yourself or your children. The situation has become less dire in the past week, with the Haitian government imposing price cuts on staple goods like beans and rice. But that's a Band-Aid at best.<sup>1,2</sup>

It's very tempting for us, 2,000 miles away, to hear this news and fall either into denial or despair. What can I do about the price of food in Haiti? What can I do about global hunger? Nothing, right? This seems like just one more example of the world's awful suffering – suffering that, like the poor themselves, has always been with us and will always be with us, until the fulfillment of the reign of God.

But wait. We are God's "royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." We have been transformed by our baptisms into the risen life of Christ. There is something about us, something within us, something that gnaws at us – something that will not let us just sit by and watch.

I had an e-mail from one of you this past week that shows what I'm talking about. This person asked me just how it is that we're supposed to sleep at night, given the state of life in Haiti, and Tanzania, and a thousand other places where darkness seems to reign. She said, "I feel so heavy when I think of places like Haiti and Africa ... those are bottomless pits of need. It makes me wonder – in places where people suffer the most, when do they feel like *their* cares are being answered?" And she went on to say that she felt compelled to do something to make a difference, to bring the presence of God into situations like these.

Theological reflection by e-mail – it's a great example of the fact that who we are, deep down, compels us to do more than simply sit by and watch.

So, what *can* we do, as the people of God, to bring God's healing power to bear on hunger in places like Haiti? We can follow the model of Stephen, the deacon and martyr. We can speak as witnesses. We can speak as prophets. And we can act as agents of Good News.

First, as witnesses: Even in the context of global hunger, we can tell the surprising story of the goodness of God and the goodness of creation. That may sound crazy, given all that I've been saying; but that's only because we're stuck thinking inside the world's box. If people are starving and rioting, then God must be absent, right? Hardly. God provides the people of the world with the incredible abundance that the earth yields. There is enough in what this planet produces to feed every human being. You can look it up and see.<sup>3</sup> God loves us enough to create this amazingly bountiful home for us, and God loves us enough to entrust us with its management and care. God is good, and we people of God are the recipients of that goodness. We can *tell* that story. We can be witnesses of God's blessing.

And second, we can do something about hunger by taking on the role of the prophet. What's causing world hunger isn't the inadequacy of God's creation; it's our job performance as stewards of that creation. The problem isn't God's supply; it's our demand and our use of the resources we're given. The decisions we make, on a micro level and a macro level, affect how much food will be available for people in Haiti and other impoverished places. I'm no economist, but even I know that the amount of food we consume has something to do with the supply that's available in poor countries. On a larger level, if we divert agricultural production into grain to make ethanol and grain to feed livestock, that also affects how much grain is left for poor people to eat. If the patterns of our culture, whatever they may be, make less food available for the poor, we can make a prophetic witness that those patterns are working against God's purposes. We need to *tell* that truth. We need to speak as prophets.

Finally, we can act as agents of God's Good News. This kind of action usually happens on a small scale; and that's OK, because God gives most of us only small scales to work with. None of us can feed the world's poor. We can't even feed the poor of Haiti. But this congregation *can* create a lunch program for the small school we support in Maniche, Haiti. And that's the goal of the Fool's for Christ's Sake Concert and Dinner this Friday, April 25. You'll be treated to a masterful concert of flute and piano featuring Guy Montes and Sharon Hettinger. You'll be treated to a gourmet meal of Haitian cuisine – which, I promise you, is *not* an oxymoron. And by buying a ticket, you'll be helping to provide a hot, nutritious meal to more than 200 Haitian children, five days a week. That is an amazing act of proclaiming by example the Good News of God in Christ. And it's intimately connected to what we do every time we gather here for the Eucharist. When we share Communion *and* when we feed the poor, we are revealing the presence of the kingdom of God in the here and now by offering a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. In that banquet of God's kingdom, there is plenty for everyone, and everyone gets enough to eat.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that each of us is “just one person,” and just one person doesn't seem like much of an instrument of witness. But we must remember that we are people transformed by the Spirit in baptism – we are “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.” And each one of us people of God bears Jesus Christ into the world. Part of the deep mystery of incarnation is that our humanity is enlivened by the spark of divinity because God, in Christ, chose to dwell among

us and chooses to dwell among us still. With that presence of Christ empowering us, we can proclaim God's Good News by word and example, bringing divine healing into the world's most broken places. It doesn't always take Stephen's eloquence before the rulers of the world or the courage to stand in forgiveness as the stones rain down on our heads. In our particular case this week, it simply takes the witness of buying a couple of extra tickets to the Fools for Christ Sake event and then inviting some friends to come and share a glorious concert, a gourmet meal, and a glass of rum punch. That's the kind of witness we Episcopalians can handle!

1. McCarthy, Julie. "Haitians Tense after Food Prices Spark Riot." *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio. April 14, 2008. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89631333>. Accessed April 16, 2008.
2. Lacey, Marc. "Across Globe, Empty Bellies Bring Rising Anger." *New York Times* (online edition). April 18, 2008. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/18/world/americas/18food.html?\\_r=1&hp&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/18/world/americas/18food.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin). Accessed April 18, 2008.
3. World Hunger Education Service. "World Hunger Facts 2008." Available at: <http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>. Accessed April 17, 2008.
4. Borrowed with gratitude from the Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams, emeritus professor of liturgics and Anglican studies, Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, Texas.