

ST. STEPHEN, THE FIRST MARTYR (c 34 AD)

Jesus had twelve apostles. An apostle is someone with a special mission, who is sent out to do a special job. Jesus chose His apostles to build His Church and they lived with Jesus, learned from Him and traveled with Him around the countryside as He went from town to town teaching about His Father.

Jesus also had many disciples, people who came to learn from Jesus. The Bible tells us there were 72 disciples.

Saint Stephen is the first Christian martyr. A martyr is one who believes in something so fervently that they are willing to die for that belief. In the Acts of the Apostles, written by Saint Luke, the Evangelist, his faith and martyrdom is described. That St. Stephen was a Jew is unquestionable, and he probably was a Hellenist of the Dispersion, who spoke Greek. The name Stephen is Greek, Stephanos, and signifies "crown". The circumstances of his conversion to Christianity are not known.

In the days after the Ascension and Pentecost, the numbers of disciples grew so large that the apostles had no time to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the Word. The Apostles assembled the faithful and told them that they could not relinquish the duties of preaching and prayer to attend to the care of tables; and recommended them to choose seven men of good character, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, who might superintend that business. The people chose Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost", and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas. These seven were presented to the Apostles, who, praying, imposed hands upon them, and so ordained them the first deacons.

Stephen, along with the other 7 men, began to serve the poor and preach to the people about Jesus. More and more people joined the Christians. Of course, those who had conspired against Jesus and saw Him as a threat to the Jewish faith were still in Jerusalem. To their dismay, crucifying Jesus hadn't stopped His teaching. The Apostles and the deacons continued meeting in the temple and on street corners, teaching the Gospel. Many people, including priests joined the Christians.

A group called the Libertines, or the Synagogue of Roman Freemen, tried to argue with Saint Stephen. But when they could not win any debates with him, they found false witnesses to accuse him of blasphemy to the Sanhedrin.

Stephen spoke with such wisdom and spirit that his hearers were unable to resist him, and a plot was laid by the elders of certain synagogues in Jerusalem. The main point urged against him was that he affirmed that the temple would be destroyed, that the Mosaic traditions were but shadows and types no longer acceptable to God, Jesus of Nazareth having put an end to them.

Stephen was allowed to speak and in a long defense laid out in Acts 7:2-53, he showed that Abraham, the father and founder of their nation, was justified and received the greatest favours of God in a foreign land; that Moses was commanded to set up a Temple,

but it was not to be imagined that God was confined in houses made by hands: the temple and the Mosaic law were temporary, and were to give place when God introduced more excellent institutions by sending the Messiah himself. He ended with a stinging rebuke: "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in hearts and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you also. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you have been now the betrayers and murderers: who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it."

The whole assembly raged at Stephen, but he, being full of the Holy Spirit and looking up steadfastly to the heavens, saw them opened and beheld the glory of God and the Saviour standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God". And they, crying out with a loud voice, stopped their ears and with one accord ran violently upon him. And, casting him forth without the city, they stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, invoking and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". And falling on his knees, he cried with a loud voice, saying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge". And when he had said this he fell asleep in the Lord.