

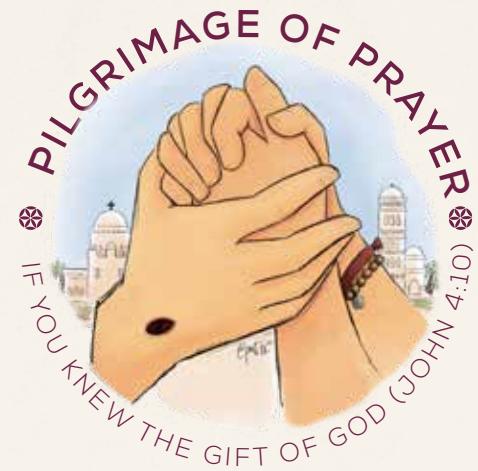
Day 23

Cloud of Witnesses

For Personal Reflection & Prayer

- Who was someone that brought you close to God through their example? What inspired you about them?
- Is there a particular saint that I identify with? What is it about them that I see reflected in me or what I aspire to be?

Take these considerations to the Lord in prayer, asking for light and strength.



Offer a prayer inspired by the words of Scripture:

*Since we are surrounded
By so great a cloud of witnesses...
Let us persevere in running the race
Before us.*

Hebrews 12:1

Prayer of Pope Benedict XVI on St. Stephen

St Stephen is the most representative of a group of seven companions. Tradition sees in this group the seed of the future ministry of "deacons", although it must be pointed out that this category is not present in the Book of Acts. In any case, Stephen's importance is due to the fact that Luke, in his important book, dedicates two whole chapters to him. Luke's narrative starts with the observation of a widespread division in the primitive Church of Jerusalem: indeed, she consisted entirely of Christians of Jewish origin, but some came from the land of Israel and were called "Hebrews", while others, of the Old Testament Jewish faith, came from the Greek-speaking Diaspora and were known as "Hellenists"...



The most important thing to note is that in addition to charitable services, Stephen also carried out a task of evangelization among his compatriots, the so-called "Hellenists". Indeed, Luke insists on the fact that Stephen, "full of grace and power" (Acts 6: 8), presented in Jesus' Name a new interpretation of Moses and of God's Law itself. He reread the Old Testament in the light of the proclamation of Christ's death and Resurrection. He gave the Old Testament a Christological reinterpretation and provoked reactions from the Jews, who took his words to be blasphemous (cf. Acts 6: 11-14).

For this reason he was condemned to stoning. And St Luke passes on to us the saint's last discourse, a synthesis of his preaching. Just as Jesus had shown the disciples of Emmaus that the whole of the Old Testament speaks of him, of his Cross and his Resurrection, so St Stephen, following Jesus' teaching, interpreted the whole of the Old Testament in a Christological key. He shows that the mystery of the Cross stands at the centre of the history of salvation as recounted in the Old Testament; it shows that Jesus, Crucified and Risen, is truly the goal of all this history.

St Stephen also shows that the cult of the temple was over and that Jesus, the Risen One, was the new, true "temple". It was precisely this "no" to the temple and to its cult that led to the condemnation of St Stephen, who at this moment, St Luke tells us, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and seeing heaven, God and Jesus, St Stephen said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (cf. Acts 7: 56).

This was followed by his martyrdom, modelled in fact on the passion of Jesus himself, since he delivered his own spirit to the "Lord Jesus" and prayed that the sin of those who killed him would not be held against them (cf. Acts 7: 59-60)...The killing of Stephen, the first martyr of Christ, unleashed a local persecution of Christ's disciples (cf. Acts 8: 1), the first one in the history of the Church. It was these circumstances that impelled the group of Judeo-Hellenist Christians to flee from Jerusalem and scatter. Hounded out of Jerusalem, they became itinerant missionaries: "Those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 8: 4). Their persecution and consequent dispersion became a mission. Thus, the Gospel spread also to Samaria, Phoenicia and Syria, as far as the great city of Antioch where, according to Luke, it was proclaimed for the first time also to the pagans (cf. Acts 11: 19-20), and where, for the first time the name "Christians" was used (Acts 11: 26).

Above all, St Stephen speaks to us of Christ, of the Crucified and Risen Christ as the centre of history and our life. We can understand that the Cross remains forever the



centre of the Church's life and also of our life. In the history of the Church, there will always be passion and persecution. And it is persecution itself which, according to Tertullian's famous words, becomes "the seed of Christians", the source of mission for Christians to come. I cite his words: "We multiply wherever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed..." (Apology 50, 13): Plures efficimur quoties metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis christianorum. But in our life too, the Cross that will never be absent, becomes a blessing.

And by accepting our cross, knowing that it becomes and is a blessing, we learn Christian joy even in moments of difficulty. The value of witness is irreplaceable, because the Gospel leads to it and the Church is nourished by it. St Stephen teaches us to treasure these lessons, he teaches us to love the Cross, because it is the path on which Christ comes among us ever anew.

https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070110.html

