



## GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

### PARISH OF THE ANNUNCIATION OF OUR LADY, “EVANGELISMOS”

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### SUNDAY 27 DECEMBER 2020 – SUNDAY AFTER THE NATIVITY

**EPISTLE:** The Reading is from the Acts of the Apostles [6:8-15, 7:1-5, 47-60] And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; “for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change customs which Moses delivered to us.” And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. Then the high priest said, “Are these things so?” And he said, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, “Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.” Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him...But Solomon built Him a house. However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophets says: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? Says the Lord, or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?’ You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not

persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it. When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God! Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

**EXPLANATION:** The Book of Acts, written by St Luke in 75-85AD recounts the rapid growth of the Church throughout the Mediterranean world after the Ascension of Our Lord. Many of the Jewish priests who became Christians did not continue to function in a priestly capacity within the Church. They adhered to the Mosaic Law. Stephen was the leader of the deacons because of his special spiritual gifts and attributes. He was ordained by the Apostles to assist them with their evangelism along with several others. (6:8) The "Freedmen" were Jews who had formerly been held captive under the Romans, usually as a result of rebelliousness. A number of them and their descendants gained their freedom and in their zeal returned from Alexandria, Cyrene, Cilicia and Asia Minor to Jerusalem where they built their own synagogue. (6:9) Unable to refute Stephen's inspired wisdom, the Freedmen, misunderstanding Stephen's words, resorted to charging him with blasphemy against Moses and God. Stephen was among the first Christians to proclaim the Christian faith and worship is for all people, not only Jews. Although Christianity includes changes in the Mosaic Law and in temple worship, these changes are according to God's will – not blasphemous, as these opponents believed. (6:10-11) So they set up false witnesses to destroy him. (6:13) The charge that Jesus would destroy the temple was levelled against him by false witnesses at his trial before the council. This was a misinterpretation of two of Jesus's sayings: 1) "Destroy the temple, and in three days I will raise it up (John 2:19) – referring to His own body; and 2) His prophecy of the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24:1-2). This prophecy was fulfilled in 70AD, when the Romans destroyed the temple in reprisal against a Jewish rebellion. (6:14) All who sat in the council witnessed a divine radiance on Stephen's face as that of an angel. This was the uncreated energy of God which was reflected in Stephen's face, a foretaste of the glory of the age to come for all the people of God. (6:15) Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?" Stephen does not answer the question of the priest yes or no. To

provide a proper context in which to answer his accusers he embarks on a review of salvation history to show how the Jews consistently missed the purpose of God's dealings with them because of their hardness of heart. Stephen had a remarkable knowledge of the Old Testament and related to the council that because of their disobedience and hardness of heart Abraham's descendants were brought into bondage in Egypt for four hundred years. (7:1-5) Stephen then recounts the history of the temple as God's earthly sanctuary. But he tries to make them understand that God is limitless, He cannot be contained, He is everywhere and in everything. He does not dwell in temples made with hands. He is a Spirit. The idea that worship must be performed only at a specific place will give away to Christ's revolutionary teaching about worship in spirit and in truth. (John4:21-24) (7:47-50) He then admonishes them – "you stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit as your father's did, so do you". The uncircumcised in heart means those who have not purified or cut off the passions. Israel resisted the Holy Spirit in that they did not heed God's guidance through the prophets, but rebelled against it. By implication, Stephen is saying that the contemporary Jewish leaders and their followers are still resisting the Holy Spirit in rejecting the mission of Jesus and the Church. (7:51-53) But when they heard these things they were offended and wanted to kill him. (7:54) Stephen's vision of the enthroned Christ in heaven appears as the ultimate blasphemy to his opponents. He said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (7:55-56) Then they cast him out of the city in anger and stoned him. The Old Testament penalty for blasphemy was stoning. Saul, an indirect participant in the martyrdom of Stephen, was the great prosecutor of the early Christians. Later he will be called by Christ to be His Apostle and will become the great Christian missionary, Paul of Tarsus. (7:57-58) And as they stoned him, Stephen cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." Stephen's words are reminiscent of Christ's words from the Cross – "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." (7:60) The martyrdom of St Stephen, called the Protomartyr, was the beginning of the first widespread persecution of the early Christians. In response to it they scattered throughout the regions of Palestine, using the opportunity to spread the gospel.

**GOSPEL:** **The Reading is from St Matthew [2:13-23]** Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.' When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son". Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived

by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more." Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archlaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene."

**EXPLANATION:** The precious death of the innocent young infants signifies that through the merit of humility one comes to the glory of martyrdom, and that unless one has turned and become as a little child, one will not be able to give one's life for Christ. The fact that Jesus Himself was taken by His parents into Egypt, confirms that He was truly man. For if He had fallen into the hands of Herod and had not been slain, it would have seemed that He had been made flesh only in appearance. He flees into Egypt to sanctify even this place by His presence. We also must flee and not hesitate to turn away from the ferocity and wickedness of evil men. All persecutions brought against the Church would be avenged by God in its proper time and when these persecutors had been given their just deserts, peace would be restored to the Church; and just as Jesus and his parents returned to Israel when Herod dies, so the saints who had been hiding because of persecutions would return to their places when God intervened. The prophet Jeremiah pictures Rachel, wife of Jacob in the city of Ramah who had long been dead, weeping even in her tomb for the slaughter of the infants. (2:13-23) But, we should not mourn the death of the "Holy Innocents" because they are as the saints in heaven and have been introduced into the joy of the Lord to be crowned as His forever.

All who have been privileged to visit the Church of the Nativity in the holy City of Bethlehem have seen the burial tombs on many of these young innocents, deep below the grotto where Jesus was born. Each year on 29th December, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem conducts special services in memory of the death of over 14,000 young male infants two years and under who died at the hands of Herod, an insane tyrant.