

SUNDAY WITHIN THE CHRISTMAS OCTAVE

ST. STEPHEN

(Stephen in the writings of Maria Valtorta are on p. 48ff)

(Mt 23: 34-9) (No audio)

(Poem Vol. 5, pp. 448-9 – Gospel Vol. 9, p. 423-4);

(Jesus speaks:) 'Woe to you, hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, who build magnificent sepulchres for the prophets and decorate the tombs of holy men saying: "Had we lived in our fathers' days, we would never had joined those who shed the blood of the prophets". And so you give evidence against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered your prophets. And you, moreover, are finishing the work of your fathers... Serpents, brood of vipers, how can you escape being condemned to Gehenna?

So I, the Word of God, say to you: I, God, will send you new prophets and wise men and scribes. Some you will slaughter, some you will crucify, some you will scourge in your law-courts, in your synagogues, outside the walls of your towns, and some you will hunt from town to town, until you draw on yourselves the blood of the just men, that has been shed on the Earth, from the blood of the just Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachian, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar, because for your own sake he had reminded you of your sin, that you might repent and go back to the Lord. It is so. You hate those who want your welfare and lovingly call you back to the paths of God.

I solemnly tell you that all that is about to happen, both the crime and its consequences. I solemnly tell you that all this will be accomplished on this generation.

Oh! Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Jerusalem, you that stone those who have been sent to you and kill your prophets! How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused! Now listen, Jerusalem! Now listen, you who hate Me and hate everything that comes from God. Now listen, you who love Me and who will be carried away by the punishment laid aside for the persecutors of the Messengers of God. And you also listen to Me, you who do not belong to this people, but who listen to Me just the same, listen and learn Who He is Who is speaking to you and foretells without having to study the flight, the warbling of birds, or celestial phenomena, or the viscera of sacrificed animals, or the fire and smoke of holocausts, because all the future is the present for Him Who is speaking to you. "This House of yours will be left desolate to you. And I say to you, says the Lord, that you shall not see Me any more until you also say: 'Blessings on Him Who comes in the name of the Lord".'

Jesus is clearly tired and hot, both because of the long thundering speech, and of the sultriness of the windless day. Pressed against the wall by a multitude of people, avidly

gazed upon by thousands of people, feeling all the hatred of those who are listening to Him under the porches of the court of the Gentiles, and all the love or at least the admiration surrounding Him, indifferent to the sun blazing down on backs and reddened perspiring faces, He really looks exhausted. He needs solace and He seeks it saying to His apostles and to the seventy-two disciples, who like wedges have opened a passage through the crowd and who are now in the front line, forming a faithful loving barrier around Him: "Let us leave the Temple and go out into the open, among trees. I am in need of shade, silence and fresh air. This place really seems to be already burning with the fire of celestial wrath."

St. Stephen from the writings of Maria Valtorta

Stephen and Hermas with Jesus

Jesus is in the Korazim plain, along the upper Jordan valley, between the lakes of Gennesaret and Merom. The country is covered with vineyards and it is already vintage time.

He must have been there for some days, because the disciples who were at Sicaminon have joined Him this morning, and among them there is Stephen with Hermas. Isaac apologises for not coming earlier, because, he says, the new disciples and his uncertainty whether he should bring them or not caused the delay. "But " he says " I thought that the way to Heaven is open to all those of good will and these two, although they are pupils of Gamaliel, seem to be so."

"You are right and you have done the right thing. Bring them here."

Isaac goes away and comes back with the two disciples [Hermas and Stephen].

"Peace to you. Has the apostolic word seemed so true to you that you have decided to join it?"

"Yes, and Yours above all. Do not send us away, Master?"

"Why should I?"

"Because we are disciples of Gamaliel "

"So what? I honour the great Gamaliel and I would like him to be with Me, because he is worthy of it. That is all he lacks to make his wisdom perfect. What did he say to you when you left him? Because you certainly said goodbye to him."

"Yes, he said to us: "You are lucky that you can believe. Pray that I may forget in order to remember."

The apostles who have gathered round Jesus inquisitively, look at one another and ask whispering: What does he mean? What does he want? To forget in order to remember?"

Jesus hears their whispering and explains: "He wants to forget his wisdom to take on Mine. He wants to forget that he is rabbi Gamaliel to remember that he is a son of Israel awaiting the Christ. He wants to forget himself, to remember the Truth."

"Gamaliel is not untruthful, Master." replies Hermas apologetically.

"No, he is not. But it is the medley of poor human words which is untruthful. Words taking the place of the Word. You must forget them, divesting yourselves of them and come to the Truth as pure as virgins in order to be re clothed and fecundated. Humility is required for that. The difficulty..."

"Then, we must forget as well?"

"Undoubtedly. You must forget everything pertaining to man. And remember what pertains to God. Come. You can do it."

"We want to do it. " confirms Hermas.

"Have you already lived as disciples?"

"Yes, we have. Since the day we heard the Baptist had been killed. The news spread very rapidly in Jerusalem, where it was brought by Herod's courtiers and commanders. His death roused us from our torpidity." replies Stephen.

"The blood of martyrs is always a new life for torpid people, Stephen. Remember that."

"Yes, Master. Will You speak today? I hunger for Your word."

"I have already spoken. But I will speak again, and very much, to you disciples. Your companions, the apostles, have already begun their mission, after due preparation. But they are not sufficient for the needs of the world. And everything is to be done in good time. I am like one who has an expiry date and must do everything within that date. I ask you all to help Me, and in the name of God I promise you help and a glorious future.." [...]

"I am a free man and I go with whomever I wish" says John, the priest.

"So am I." says the last arrival: John, the scribe, who dealt out the food at the foot of the Mount of Beatitudes on the Sabbath.

"And we are free, too." state Hermas and Stephen.

And Stephen adds: "Speak to us, Lord. We do not know what our mission exactly consists in. Give us the least necessary to enable us to serve You at once. The rest will come as we follow You."

(*Poem*, Vol.2 pp.752-4; *Gospel*, Vol. 4, 350-2)

(Stephen cautions Jesus. Jesus is on His way to Bethany with the apostles and disciples [...])

They proceed in silence for some time. Then Stephen approaches the Master and says: "I have something to tell You. I was hoping that You would ask me, but You did not. Yesterday Gamaliel spoke to me... "

"I saw him."

"Are You not asking me what he told me?"

"I am waiting for you to tell Me, because a good disciple has no secrets from his Master."

"Gamaliel... Master, come a little ahead with me... "

"Well... let us go. But you could have spoken in the presence of everybody... "

They move away a few yards. Stephen blushing says: " I must give You a piece of advice, Master. Forgive me... "

"If it is good, I will accept it. Tell Me."

"In the Sanhedrin, they know everything sooner or later. It is an institution with a thousand eyes and one hundred ramifications. They penetrate everywhere, see everything and hear everything. It has more informers than there are bricks in the walls of the Temple. Many live thus... "

"Spying. You may say so. It is the truth and I know. So? What has been said, more or less true, at the Sanhedrin?"

"Everything... has been said. I do not know how they can find out certain things. Neither do I know whether they are true... But I will tell You literally what Gamaliel told me: 'Tell the Master to have Ermasteus circumcised or to send him away for good. It is not necessary to say anything else'."

"In fact it is not necessary to say anything else. First of all because I am going to Bethany just for that and I will remain there until Ermasteus is fit to travel again. Secondly because no justification could demolish the prejudice and... standoffishness of Gamaliel, who is scandalised because I have with Me a man who

is not circumcised in a member of his body. Oh! if he looked around and within himself! How many uncircumcised people in Israel!”

“But Gamaliel...”

“He is the perfect representative of old Israel. He is not wicked, but... Look at this pebble. I could split it, but I could not make it malleable. He is like that. He will have to be crushed in order to be recomposed. And I will do that!”

“Do You want to oppose Gamaliel? Be careful! He is powerful!”

“Oppose? As if he were an enemy? No. Instead of fighting against him, I will love him, satisfying one of his desires for his mummified brains and spreading on him a balm which will dissolve him to recompose him.”

“I will pray also that that may happen, because I am fond of him. Am I wrong?”

“No. You must love him by praying for him. And you will do that. I am sure you will. Nay, you will help Me to prepare the balm... However, you will tell Gamaliel, to calm him, that I had already provided for Ermasteus and that I am grateful to him for his advice. [...]”

(*Poem*, Vol.3 pp.45-46; *Gospel*, Vol. 4, 413-4)

(Stephen preaching and Jesus' prophecises about Stephen)

The beach at Capernaum is crowded with people disembarking from a flotilla of boats of all sizes. And the first to land spread among the crowds looking for the Master, or an apostle or at least a disciple. And they ask after them...

A man at last replies: “The Master? The apostles? No, they are not here. They went away immediately after the Sabbath and have not come back. But they will come back, because some of the disciples are here. I spoke just now to one of them. He must be an important disciple. He speaks as well as Jairus! He went along the coast towards that house in the fields.”

The man who asked the question, spreads the news and they all rush towards the house. But after about two hundred metres they meet on the beach a group of disciples coming towards Capernaum gesticulating animatedly. They greet them and ask: “Where is the Master?”

The disciples reply: “During the night, after the miracle, He went with His disciples by boat to the other side of the sea. We saw the sails in the moonlight going towards Dalmanuta ”

“Ah! We looked for Him at Magdala, at Mary's house, but He was not there! However... the fishermen of Magdala should have told Us!”

“They probably did not know. He may have gone up the Arbela mountains to pray. He has been there before, last year, before Passover. I met Him then, by the great grace of the Lord to His poor servant” says Stephen.

“But is He not coming back here?”

“ He will certainly come back. He has to give us instructions before sending us away. But what do you want?”

“We want to hear Him again, to follow Him and become His disciples.”

“He will be going to Jerusalem. You will find Him there. And in the House of God, the Lord will speak to you and you will know whether you ought to follow Him. Because you must know that, although He does not reject anybody, there are tendencies in us which reject the Light. Now, he who has so many of them as to be not only saturated with them - which is not a great evil because He is Light and when we firmly decide to become His loyal followers His Light penetrates into us and overwhelms darkness but to be also deeply attached to them, as to one's own body, then it is better for him to refrain from coming, unless he is prepared to demolish his old being and form a completely new one. Consider, therefore, whether you have the strength to take on a new spirit, a new way of thinking and wanting. Pray in order to see the truth concerning your vocation. Then come, if you should so decide. And may the Most High, Who guided Israel in the ‘passage’, guide you also in this ‘Pesach’, so that you may follow in the wake of the Lamb, from the desert, towards the eternal Earth, the Kingdom of God” says Stephen, speaking on behalf of all his companions.

“No, no! Now! At once! No one does what He does. We want to follow Him” shout the crowds in tumult.

Stephen smiles meaningfully. He opens his arms and says: “Do you want to come because He gave you plenty good bread? Do you think that in future He will give you only that? He promises His followers what is His own lot: sorrow, persecution, martyrdom. Not roses, but thorns; not caresses, but slaps; not bread but stones are awaiting the followers of Christ. And I say so without becoming a blasphemer, because His true followers will be anointed with the holy oil made by His Grace and His suffering; and we shall be "anointed" to be the victims on the altar and the kings in Heaven ”

“Well? Are you jealous perhaps? If you are there, we want to be there as well. The Master belongs to everybody.”

“All right. I told you because I love you and I want you to know what it means to be ‘disciples’, so that you may not become deserters later. Let us now go all together and wait for Him at His house. The sun is already setting and the Sabbath is about to begin. He will come to spend it here before departing.”

And they go towards the town, talking. And many ask Stephen and Hermas, who has joined them, many questions, as they are both placed in a very favourable light in the eyes of the Israelites, because they are Gamaliel's dearest pupils. Many ask: "But what does Gamaliel say about Him?", and some: "Did he send you?", and some: "Did he not regret losing you?", or: "What does the Master say of the great rabbi?"

The two disciples reply patiently: "Gamaliel speaks of Jesus of Nazareth as of the greatest man in Israel."

"What? Greater than Moses?" exclaim some, who are almost scandalised.

"He says that Moses is one of the many precursors of the Christ. But he is only the servant of the Christ "

"So, according to Gamaliel, this man is the Christ? Is that what he says? If rabbi Gamaliel says that, the matter is settled. He is the Christ "

"He does not say that. He cannot yet believe that, unfortunately for him. But he says that the Christ is on the earth, because he spoke to Him many years ago. Both he and wise Hillel. And he is waiting for the sign that Christ promised him so that he may recognise Him." says Hermas.

"But how could he believe that that man was the Christ? What did He do? I am as old as Gamaliel, but I never heard of anyone doing the things that the Master does. If he is not convinced by these miracles, what miracles did he see in that Christ that he believed in Him "

"He saw Him anointed with the Wisdom of God. So he says" replies Hermas once again.

"Well, then, what is this one according to Gamaliel?"

"The greatest man, master and precursor in Israel. If he could say: 'He is the Christ', the wise and just soul of my first master would be saved" says Stephen and he concludes: "And I pray that that may happen, at all costs."

"But if he does not believe that He is the Christ, why did he send you to Him?"

"We wanted to come. He let us come saying that it was a good thing."

"Perhaps he wanted to find out things and report them to the Sanhedrin..." insinuates one.

"Man, what are you saying? Gamaliel is honest. He does not play the spy for anybody, and particularly for the enemies of an innocent person!" objects Stephen and he is so indignant and almost beaming with holy indignation that he looks like an archangel.

"But he must have been sorry to lose you." states another man.

“He was and was not. As a man who was fond of us, yes. As a very righteous spirit, no. Because he said: ‘He is greater than I am and younger than I am. So I will be able to breathe my last peacefully, as far as your future is concerned, as I know that you are with the ‘Master of masters’.”

“And what does Jesus of Nazareth say of the great rabbi?”

“Oh! He speaks but highly of him!”

“Is He not envious of him?”

“God does not envy.” replies Hermas severely. “Do not make sacrilegious suppositions ”

“So He is God according to you. Are you sure?”

And the two reply together: “As we are sure that we are alive just now.” And Stephen concludes: “And believe it yourselves if you wish to possess eternal Life ”

From the beach, they go into the square, which they cross going towards the house. Jesus is at the door caressing some children.

The disciples and some curious people crowd round Him asking: “Master, when did You come ”

“A few minutes ago.” Jesus' countenance is still as majestically solemn, somewhat ecstatic, as when He has been engrossed in prayer for a long time.

“Have You been praying, Master?” asks Stephen in a low voice out of respect, and for the same reason he has stooped.

“Yes, I have. What makes you understand that, My son?” asks Jesus laying His hand on the disciple's dark hair with a kind caress.

“Your angelical face. I am a poor man, but the expression of Your face is so clear that one can read on it the emotions and deeds of Your spirit.”

“Yours also is clear. You are one of those who remain children...”

“And what is there on my face, Lord?”

“Come aside and I will tell you ” and Jesus takes him by the wrist and leads him into a dark corridor. “ Charity, faith, purity, generosity, wisdom; God gave them to you and you have improved them and you will do so even more in future. Finally, in accordance with your name, you have a crown: it is of pure gold with a large gem glittering in front. On the gold and on the gem there are two expressions engraved: ‘Predestination’ and ‘Early Fruit’. Be worthy of your destiny, Stephen. Go in peace with My blessing.” And once again He rests His hand on Stephen's dark hair while he kneels down and bends to kiss His feet. They go back to the others.

(Poem, Vol. 3 pp. 437-40; Gospel, Vol. 5 pp. 403-6)

(The meeting with the Disciples and their arrival at Jericho. Jesus meets with a large group of disciples led by Manaen.)

They seem to be waiting. They are, in fact, and they say so after greeting the Master, stating that some more have gone along other routes to get information, as the delay of a whole night in arriving at Jericho had worried them.

“I came here with these. And I will not leave You any more until I see You safe with Lazarus” says Manaen.

“Why? Is there any danger?...” asks Judas Thaddeus.

“You are in Judaea... You are aware of the decree. And of their hatred. So we must fear everything” replies Manaen and turning towards Jesus he says: “I brought the strongest men with me because, if they had not caught You, we presumed that You would come this way. And taking into account our worth as disciples and men, we confide in impressing the wicked and having You respected ”

In fact, there are with him the ex-disciples of Gamaliel (Hermas and Stephen), [...] men from all the regions in Palestine, and among them there are two from the court of Herod Philip. [...]

“Let us go. Is there no one with the women, at Nike's?” asks Jesus.

“The shepherds. All of them, except Jonathan who is waiting for Johanna in the mansion in Jerusalem. But Your disciples have grown exceedingly. They were about five hundred waiting for You yesterday at Jericho. So much so that Herod's servants became upset and informed him. And he did not know whether he should tremble or be pitiless. But he is haunted by the memory of John and he dare no longer lift his hand against any prophet.”

“Good! That will do You no harm!” exclaims Peter and he rubs his hands gladly.

“But he is the one who is worth less. He is an idol that anyone can move as one likes, and those who have him in their hands know how to move him.”

“And who has him in his hands? Pilate perhaps?” asks Bartholomew.

“Pilate does not need Herod to take action. Herod is a servant. The mighty ones do not apply to servants” replies Manaen.

“Who, then?” asks Bartholomew.

“The Temple replies resolutely one who is with Manaen.

“But Herod is anathema to the Temple. His sin...”

“Notwithstanding your learning and your age, you are very naive, Bartholomew! So do you not know that the Temple can overcome many, too many things to attain its objects? That is why it does not deserve to exist any longer” says Manaen with a gesture of utter contempt.

“You are an Israelite. You must not speak thus. The Temple is always the Temple for us” says Bartholomew in an admonishing tone.

“No. It is the corpse of what it was. And a corpse turns into an unclean carrion when it has been dead for a long time. That is why God sent the living Temple. That we may prostrate ourselves before the Lord without performing an unclean pantomime.”

Be quiet!” whispers to Manaen another man who is with him, as he speaks too clearly. He is one of those who were not introduced and he is completely enveloped in his mantle.

“Why should I be silent, if my heart speaks thus? Do you think that my words may harm the Master? If so, I will be quiet. But for no other reason. Even if they should condemn me I will say: “That is what I think and punish no one but me.”

“Manaen is right. Enough of being silent for fear. It is time for every man to declare his opinion for or against the Master and to reveal what he has in his heart. I am of your opinion, brother in Jesus. And if that should bring about our death, we shall die together still professing the truth.” says Stephen with transport.

(*Poem*, Vol. 5 pp.299-300; *Gospel*, Vol 9, p. 236)

Stephen was one of the disciples with the Risen Jesus on Mt Tabor

Stephen was one of the disciples at the Ascension of Jesus

Stephen was present at the First Mass

The Trial & Martyrdom of Stephen.

The hall of the Sanhedrin, identical, both with regard to disposition and to people, to what it was in the night between Thursday and Friday, during Jesus' trial. The High Priest and the others are sitting on their seats. In the middle, in front of the High Priest, in the empty space where, during the trial Jesus was, there is now Stephen.

He must have already spoken professing his faith and bearing witness to the true Nature of the Christ and to His Church, because the tumult is at its climax and in its violence it is similar to the one that raged against the Christ in the fatal night of the betrayal and deicide. Blows, curses, horrible oaths are hurled against the deacon Stephen who, under the brutal blows, staggers and totters while they savagely tug him here and there.

But he keeps his calm and dignity, and even more. He is not only calm and dignified, but he is even blissful and almost ecstatic. Disregarding the spittles streaming down his face and the blood running from his nose, that has been violently struck, at a certain moment he raises his inspired face and his bright smiling eyes to stare at a vision known to him alone. He stretches his arms out crosswise, he raises them up as if he wished to embrace what he sees, then he falls on his knees exclaiming: "Here, I can see the Heavens thrown open, and the Son of Man, Jesus, the Christ of God, Whom you have killed, standing at the right hand of God."

Then the tumult loses even that least part that it still retained of humanity and legality and, with the fury of a pack of wolves, of jackals, of rabid wild beasts, they all hurl themselves on the deacon, they bite him, they trample on him, they grasp him, they raise him lifting him by his hair, they drag him, letting him drop again, while fury opposes fury, because in the rush those who try to drag the martyr outside are hindered by those who pull him in another direction to strike him and tread on him again.

Among the most furious ones there is a young short ugly looking man, named Saul. The fierceness of his face is indescribable.

In a corner of the hall there is Gamaliel. He has never taken part in the brawl, neither has he ever addressed Stephen or any mighty person. His disgust for the unfair wild scene is manifest. In another corner there is Nicodemus, who is also disgusted and does not take part in the trial or in the brawl, and is looking at Gamaliel, whose countenance is clearer than any word. But suddenly, and precisely when he sees Stephen being lifted by his hair for the third time, Gamaliel envelops himself in his very wide mantle and he goes towards an exit in the opposite direction to that towards which the deacon (Stephen) is being dragged.

[...] Saul, with an angry gesture, goes away, rudely, to the court facing the hall of the Sanhedrin, the court in which the crowd is still shouting in exasperation against Stephen. In this court Saul joins the torturers who were waiting for him, and with the others he comes out of the Temple and then out of the town walls. Abuse, jeers continue to be shouted at, and blows to be dealt to the deacon, who already tired out and wounded, proceeds staggering towards the place of the execution.

Outside the walls there is a stretch of waste land covered with stones, completely desert. When the executioners arrive there, they spread out forming a circle, leaving the condemned man all alone in the centre with his torn garments and his body bleeding in many parts as a result of the wounds already inflicted on it. They tear his garments off him before moving away from him. Stephen is left with a very short tunic. They all take their long garments off and remain with their tunics only, as short as the one worn by Saul, to whom they entrust their garments, as he does not take part in the lapidation, either because he has been upset by Gamaliel's words, or because he knows that he is not good at hitting the mark. The executioners pick up

some large pebbles and some sharp stones, in which the place abounds, and they begin the lapidation.

Stephen receives the first blows standing, and with a smile of forgiveness on his wounded lips which, a moment before the beginning of the lapidation, have shouted to Saul, intent on gathering the clothes of the lapidators: "My friend, I will wait for you on the way of the Christ."

To which Saul replied: "Pig! Possessed!" adding to the insults a mighty kick on the shin-bone of the deacon, who almost falls because of the blow and of the pain.

After some blows with stones, that strike him from all directions, Stephen falls on his knees, supporting himself with his wounded hands, and certainly recollecting a remote episode, he whispers, touching his temple and his wounded forehead: "As He foretold me! The crown... The rubies... O my Lord, Master, Jesus, receive my spirit."

Another hail of blows on his already wounded head makes him collapse on the ground that becomes impregnated with his blood. While he lies on the stones, always under hails of more of them, on the point of breathing his last, he whispers: "Lord... Father... forgive them... bear them no grudge for this sin of theirs... They do not know what..." Death breaks the sentence on his lips, a last start makes him curl himself up, and he remains so. Dead.

The executioners approach him, they throw another volley of stones on him, and almost bury him under them. They then put their clothes on, and they go away back to the Temple, intoxicated with satanic zeal, to report what they have done.

While they are speaking to the High Priest and other mighty people, Saul goes in search of Gamaliel. He does not find him at once. Inflamed with hatred against the Christians, he goes back to the Priests, he speaks to them, he convinces them to give him a parchment with the seal of the Temple, authorising him to persecute the Christians. The blood of Stephen must have made him as furious as a bull that sees red, or a generous wine given to an alcoholic.

He is about to come out of the Temple when he sees Gamaliel under the Porch of the Gentiles. He goes to him. Perhaps he wants to begin a dispute or a justification. But Gamaliel goes across the court, he enters a hall and closes the door in the face of Saul, who, offended and furious, runs out of the Temple to persecute the Christians.

(*Poem*, Vol.5, pp. 905-9; *Gospel*, Vol.10, pp. 491-7)

Retrieval of Stephen's Body.

It is the dead of night, and a very dark night, because the moon has already set, when Mary comes out of the little house at Gethsemane with Peter, James of Alphaeus, John, Nicodemus and the Zealot.

[...] They go as far as the Kidron and proceed along it, so that they are half-hidden by the wild bushes that grow near its banks. Also the murmur of the water serves to conceal and confuse the noise of the sandals of the wayfarers.

Going along the outer side of the walls all the time as far as the Gate closest to the Temple, and then proceeding into the barren desert area, they arrive at the place where Stephen was stoned. They direct their steps towards the pile of stones under which he is half buried, and they remove the stones until his poor body appears. It is by now deathly pale, both because of death and because of the blows it received during the lapidation, it is hard, stiff, all curled up as it was when he breathed his last.

Mary, Who has been mercifully kept away a few steps by John, frees Herself and runs towards that poor body, which is lacerated and covered with blood. Without worrying about the stains that the clotted blood leaves on Her dress, Mary, helped by James of Alphaeus and John, lays the body on a cloth stretched on the ground, in a spot devoid of stones, and with a linen cloth, that She dips in a small amphora handed to Her by the Zealot, She cleans, as best She can, the face of Stephen, She tidies his hair, trying to bring it round to his temples and wounded cheeks, in order to cover the horrible marks left by the stones. She cleans also the other parts of the body and She would also like to arrange them in a less tragical posture. But the chill of death, which had taken place many hours previously, allows that only partially. Also the men try, stronger as they are both physically and morally than Mary, Who looks once again like the Sorrowful Mother of Golgotha and of the Sepulchre. But they also have to resign themselves to leave him in the position they have succeeded in placing him after so many efforts. They dress him again with a clean long tunic, because his has been lost or stolen, in contempt, by the lapidators, and the short tunic they have left on him is all torn and stained with blood.

Having done that, always in the faint light of the lamp that Lazarus holds very close to the poor body, they lift him and lay him on another clean cloth. Nicodemus picks up the first cloth, wet with the water used to wash the martyr and with the clotted blood, and places it under his mantle. John and James at the head, Peter and the Zealot at the feet, lift the cloth containing the body, and they set out on the way back, preceded by Lazarus and Mary. But they do not go back along the same way they came, on the contrary, going into the country and going round at the foot of the Mount of Olives, they reach the road that goes to Jericho and Bethany.

They stop there to rest and to speak. And Nicodemus, who having been present at Stephen's condemnation, [...] warns those present that the persecution against the

Christians has been ordered and has broken-out, and that Stephen is only the first of a long list of names indicated as followers of the Christ.

The first cry of all the apostles is: " Let them do what they like! We will not change, either because of threats or out of prudence! "

(*Poem*, Vol.5, pp. 912-5; *Gospel*, Vol.10, pp. 501-4)

Stephen, the first Martyr

Jesus says: "The Church, divinely inspired, remembers Gamaliel together with the story of the one whose martyrdom was the April rain making the stem burst into an ear. And it is in these days of August that in her annals the Church recalls the recovery of the body of Stephen and of him (Gamaliel) who found the way to God, sought through remembrance of my voice as a child throughout his life, the way pointed out to him by the enraptured gaze of my first martyr."

(*Notebooks 1944*, pp. 511-2)