

## **SERMON for Sunday 26.12.21 Matthew 10 17-22 (Rev Carol Harley)**

*May my words be true to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

In verse 22 of our Gospel Reading Jesus says, 'The one who stands firm to the end will be saved'. Let's try to understand what his words may mean.

It can seem strange to celebrate St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, right after Christmas Day when our dominant emotion is joy in the birth of Christ, but Stephen remained faithful to Christ, died an agonising death, forgiving his executioners, as his Master had before him, *and he was saved*.

A few years ago my friend Debbie and I spent a few days in Stratford and while there we went to a charismatic church. We were buttonholed almost immediately by a man asking us, 'Have you been saved?' and we were taken aback at the time. But later on that night, when I had time to reflect on those words, '*Have you been saved?*', I thought, that is an important question – possibly finally the only important question, but it's a hard one to answer.

Is salvation an instantaneous thing which is perfect and complete in a moment of time? Well in a sense, yes, when Jesus died at Calvary uttering that great cry, 'It is finished', I was saved at the moment when Christ died for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for the sins of the world. I am part of the world Christ came to save. I claim my share in the salvation he died for. Yet those people who ask, '*have you been saved*', don't want an answer in terms of what Christ once accomplished. They want to know if something very decisive happened at one point in your life, as happened to some of the greatest saints who started out on the Christian Way after a sudden conversion.

- To Saint Paul it came in the blinding light which struck him down on the Damascus Road.
- To Luther it came twice: once when he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm, and once later when he was climbing the penitential stairway in Rome.
- To C.S. Lewis it came in the course of a journey. When he set out on the journey he was an atheist, when it ended, he was a Christian.

But this is not how it happens to all of us, and it need not happen. And even when it does happen, it's not the end of the matter, but only the beginning – and I'm sure these saints would be the first to acknowledge that.

So when Debbie and I were asked the question, *'have you been saved'*, I would be bound to answer, 'No, not yet, but I hope and believe I'm on the way. It is not complete, but at least I'm in the process of being saved.' I believe the process has begun. It began at my baptism, as it will begin for each baptised person. But it's very far from being complete. There are still areas of my life which I haven't given over to God. The Bible accepts the gradualness of salvation. Saint Paul urges us to, 'Continue in the faith', and three times over the words of the Gospel reading Jesus himself said, *'He who endures to the end shall be saved'*.

It is the enduring that counts – not the beginning, the first step, but the last that wins the race. I can run, in my mind, – for at least one pace. I can cook as well as a top chef – at least use the microwave. I can play a Bach prelude – at least on my CD. But it's not the first pace, the first using the microwave, the first note that matters. It's not the beginning. It's the keeping going that counts.

The last wedding I took was wonderful and a joyful experience for me to have a share in it, but even more wonderful was the last pastoral visit I made before being in a wheelchair. It was to a very old couple. The husband was almost totally blind. When I was in their house, he put out his hand on the coffee table to try to find something. His wife gently guided his hand, he smiled and said, 'Thank you, my dear'. That is what marriage means – not just the ceremony, not just the wedding accessories. It's not the beginning that counts – not by itself. It's the beginning well and keeping going to the end.

*'The one who stands firm to the end, shall be saved'*.

But how? We all have our times of weariness, of boredom in our work, of irritation in our families. The same is true with our religion. At times it doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. Prayer seems pointless and Services don't suit some. Our little stock of faith forever runs away like sand through our fingers. The vision fades. Our love blows cold. Our last good resolutions join the heap of others in the scrapyard of the will – full of broken vows, purposes of good which come to nothing.

What are we to do? Well, we are to persevere to the end as did Saint Stephen and rely on the sure and certain love of God. And nowhere else is that steadfast love so clearly shown as in the life and death of Jesus, the beginning and ending of our faith, who endured the Cross that we might be saved.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*