

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on May 11, 2025

[Acts 9:36-43 / Psalm 23 / Revelation 7:9-17 / John 10:22-30](#)

*Holy & Triune God, through the hearing of Your Word:
may we fear no evil, may we not be in want,
may You revive our souls.*

There were two interesting milestones in the Church this week that a less-obvious part of our Gospel reading points to. The major event this week is that our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers got a new Bishop of Rome: Leo XIV, the first American Pope. The other event was Monday's commemoration of the Martyrs of the Reformation Era.

The Episcopal Church's commemoration lectionary states of the commemoration of the Martyrs of the Reformation:

The Roman Catholic Church [in the UK] commemorates the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales: men and women who were executed for treason between 1535 and 1679 for their allegiance to the Catholic Church. In recent years, the Church of England has shared this commemoration, broadening it to all of the English saints and martyrs of the Reformation era. This commemoration remembers not only Anglican martyrs who died for their adherence to the Church of England, but those Catholics who were killed by Anglicans—along with all other Christians who were persecuted by their fellow Christians for their beliefs, most notably the Anabaptists and the Quakers.

And on Thursday, the current Archbishop of York wrote, upon the election of the new pontiff:

As Anglicans we give thanks for [Pope Leo XIV's] call to service to Jesus Christ. As Anglicans we give thanks for his call to Christians to be bridge-builders across the divisions of our world, and the divisions that continue to exist between churches. This is something Jesus asks of us. He prays that the church will be one.

In our Gospel, “the Jews” demand answers from Jesus. Well, who are “the Jews”? Everyone in this context is a Jew: Jesus, His followers and those who demand answers but who refuse to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. That is internal division along theological lines. Yet, all of them were waiting for the Messiah. Religious division isn't new.

No, religious division isn't new. Who here has changed denominations over theological or socio-political disagreements? Who has been pushed out of their faith community for who they are or what they believe? Fortunately, no one who leaves a church these days suffers the fates of the Martyrs of the Reformation. However, the pain and hurt are real, and the sense of failure to live up to Jesus' call that we be One is real, too. And there will never be a time when everyone within the Christian faith agrees with one another such that we all worship in the same way and all love in the same way, even though we worship and love the same God.

On a day-to-day basis, we don't tend to focus on the religious divisions that are all around us. We come for communal worship; we say our private prayers; we see our friends drive past on their way to their church as we get in our cars to go on our way to our church. And all is well.

But this scripture can speak to us in deeper ways about the divisions in our lives: divisions in families, between friends or co-workers, or within the socio-political landscape of our community.

Within our family and social circles, rarely these days will there be religious differences that create problems. They do exist. I remember a friend from

summer camp whose Lutheran mother didn't speak to her for several years while she dated a Roman Catholic fellow counselor. And in the position I am in now, occasionally someone shares that there is religious division in their family or among friends.

More frequently, I hear and see and am involved in divisions due to differences in social and political views. Sometimes – often times – those views are mixed in with one's religious views. That's not wrong because we are all called to live our values. Our values are a mix of social, political and religious beliefs, and they should all align as we understand them. You may be thinking, "*Religion must stay out of politics!*" Well, I've been saying for decades: Good luck! Politicians and the proletariat alike are called by faith leaders and civic leaders to live their values, and you can't separate your faith from your political views. What you *cannot* do is impose your beliefs onto others without collaborative consideration, nor can the Government establish a religion or a religious viewpoint for the whole country.

But how do *we* sitting here deal with the divisions that affect our lives? In the next sentence in the Gospel, those to whom Jesus was speaking take up stones to kill Him, not for His good works, but for blasphemy. Fortunately Jesus escapes. Taking up stones is not the right way forward for us. Violence is never an option – speaking from my own deeply held religious, social and political values.

But one way forward is in part of the Gospel story that is left out. When the people pick up stones to throw at Him, Jesus says:

I have shown you many good works from the Father.

Mixed in with the religious division in today's Gospel and in Acts is the work of God.

The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me.

Jesus is getting on with doing God's work: being the Messiah. Doing God's work means gathering the sheep, God's people, those who know Jesus' voice to be the voice of the Anointed One for whom they have been waiting.

In Acts, Peter is doing God's work by resurrecting Dorcus, who she, herself, was diligent in carrying out God's work by clothing the poor. Regardless of our denomination of Christianity, we are all called to do God's work.

Dorcus and the widows of Joppa were "*devoted to good works and acts of charity*", as scripture tells us. They made and collected clothing and distributed it to the poor. They themselves were quite vulnerable as widows, with no social safety net. But banded together, cooperating and sharing what they had in common, they were safer and more secure. They could more easily do God's work as a collective, rather than doing it all alone.

Our faith should compel us to do God's work. As Jesus' sheep – *it's Good Shepherd Sunday, so I had better mention something about sheep* – As Jesus' sheep, following His voice is doing His work. The social outreach we engage in and the social justice issues we support are informed by how we live out our Christian faith. We read in the OT Prophets and in the words of Jesus in the Gospels that we are to care for the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the hungry, the naked, the orphan, the widow and the resident alien. So we support the Food Bank, CAPSLO and 40 Prado, and we will soon have a presentation from the Diversity Coalition on the changes in immigration enforcement and how we can support our immigrant sisters and brothers.

Doing God's work is what we are called to do. Following the voice of Jesus leads us to these works; following the *herd* is what furthers division. Listening for Jesus' voice while within the herd can lead us to reach across *some* of the divisions that we experience with our neighbors. Because, if the herd is made up of those following Jesus' voice, then the herd will be a diverse group. If the herd is made up of those following the *loudest* voice, the herd is likely being led toward divisive tribalism.

I doubt – and hope – that any of you will be participating in the demonstrations on the overpass on Vineyard Drive in Templeton. I don't think anyone's faith-driven social action leads you there. But there is enough of a mixture of faiths, political views and social views in the work being done to support 40 Prado, the Food Bank, and even events like Central Coast Pride that engaging in them bridges the divisions just a little.

We at St Stephen's have done much less hands-on social outreach and social justice since the pandemic. And true, the landscape has changed a bit.

- No longer does Hunger Awareness Day involve begging for money on the streets of San Luis Obispo. This year it will be an Open House at the Food Bank warehouse.
- No longer is Central Coast Pride just a drag show on Saturday and a festival in Mission Plaza on Sunday. Now it's a month-long series of events focusing on the different needs for expression and support of the various expressions within the LGBTQ+ community.
- The event and the organization called Women's March has disbanded and focused its human and financial resources to more broadly support the social justice movements in SLO County.
- And the Diversity Coalition has grown from a support organization to an education and action body.

All of these good works we can get involved in, both financially and with our sleeves rolled up. They can be opportunities to interact with folks who may not think or believe like we do. For decades, the Parish Council was the social outreach arm of St Stephen's. As the ways in which churches engage with social services non-profits changed over the first decade or so of this millennium, the work of the Parish Council became less effective. Then the pandemic killed it.

Do we need to go through our own death & resurrection – like Dorcas – to start anew? Our current Social Outreach / Social Justice Team is a committee of 1 – Molly Supat. She could really do with the support of a few more in organizing the work that could be done.

Today's readings illustrate to us that, amid the division that surrounds you, you can still do God's work. And sure enough, along with events of this week that

highlighted our religious divisions, doing God's work to bridge those divisions was also a part of this week. The Archbishop of York, near the end of his congratulations, wrote:

The new Pope spoke of a Church that seeks peace and remains close to those who suffer. Our wounded world needs the justice, healing and hope of Jesus Christ, and we look forward to working with Pope Leo XIV and Roman Catholics in every place to share that love with those in need.

Separated by a myriad of very real theological, practical and social differences, Anglicans and Roman Catholics worship the same God, through the same Jesus Christ, by the power of the same Holy Spirit. Likewise, we are equally called to do God's work of healing our wounded world that needs the justice, healing and hope of Jesus Christ.

In the blurb about the Martyrs of the Reformation we are reminded of the need for unity in doing this work:

By our baptisms we are incorporated into God's one church, and thus we are the heirs of both the martyrs and their executioners. It is this double heritage that must spur our efforts to heal our divisions and to work and pray for a future when Christ's prayer that His followers might be truly one as He and the Father are one will be fulfilled.

Yes, we can do that without killing each other. We are all His sheep and hear His voice.