



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

St Stephen's Day

Readings: [Acts 7.51-60](#), [Galatians 2.16b-20](#),

26 December 2021

Today we commemorate St Stephen, a Deacon of the early church and the first martyr of the Christian faith. Like me, you may wonder why it is that Stephen's feast day falls on boxing day? Like me, you may also ask yourself why is it that these three days after Christmas are reserved for such important commemorations; St Stephen today, St John the Evangelist tomorrow, and the Holy Innocents the day after.

There is no denying they are overlooked more often than not. We need to make the most of today and focus on the importance of St Stephen for the Church and for our own discipleship.

I only know one attempt to explain why these three feast days cluster around Christmas Day. It comes from the Middle Ages and suggests that the church wished to group together different types of martyrs and link them with the birth of Christ which was the cause of their martyrdom. So: there is St Stephen's martyrdom, 'willed and endured', then St John's, 'willed but not endured', and then the slaughter of the Innocents by Herod, a martyrdom 'endured but not willed'.

Let me explain. Stephen was the martyr who knew the consequences of his actions, and who suffered them. John was the Apostle who desired to die for Christ but for whom that privilege was not given. The Holy Innocents were those who suffered martyrdom but could not have been conscious of their part in the shadow side of the Christmas story.

Three feast days – two martyrs and a group of martyrs, all because of the Christ child and the life which he led.

We know that Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, and was appointed a Deacon – one of seven – to take care of the widows in the early church in Jerusalem. There had been a complaint from the Greek-speaking Christian community, the Hellenists, that the Greek-speaking widows were not being looked after well in comparison with those who were described as Hebrews, and who would in their daily lives have spoken Aramaic. Don't ever think the early church was an ideal unified community. The church as the body of Christ has always been and will always be broken in this world, though we like Stephen are called to work hard for the church's unity.

Out of the seven deacons Stephen was pre-eminent. He was full of 'grace and power'. He did 'great wonders and signs among the people'. He was 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom'. A remarkable charismatic man, one who stood out among many big personalities in the early church.

Yet Stephen's brilliance provoked a fierce antagonism. Opposition came from members the Jerusalem synagogue, those Jews who had lived throughout the Greek world and had retired back to Jerusalem. Stephen may have been an outstanding preacher for the cause of Christ but first they argued against him, they began to smear his name around the city; then they seized him and brought him in front of the religious council. They even provided false witnesses to make sure of a prosecution.

We heard this morning the tail-end of what follows a piece of public speaking that has stimulated as much reaction in modern times as it did for Stephen then, probably not more than eighteen months after Jesus' crucifixion.

One person who has tried to discredit Stephen in the twentieth century was George Bernard Shaw – not a Christian, but forthright in his opinions. Stephen, he said, was 'a quite intolerable young speaker'. He was a 'tactless and conceited bore' who 'delivered an oration to the Council in which he inflicted on them a tedious sketch of the history of Israel with which they were presumably as well acquainted as he'.

Many have disagreed. I think that Stephen's speech, is one of the great passages of the New Testament – why not read it in Acts 7 when you have time? – but its consequences are tragic. The last thing that Stephen does is *merely* rehearse the history of Israel. He is concerned, *not to* blaspheme the God of Israel, *but to* honour the Old Testament. It was his accusers who rejected the Law and its teachings, not Stephen.

Stephen presents what you might call 'pure Christianity'. It is the way of worship which God wishes for all his people. God does not dwell in a house made with human hands, the great figures of the Old Testament never imagined that God would be imprisoned in the Temple as he became. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, then David and Solomon – for them never was God's presence linked to one particular place. The God of the Old Testament was the living God – he was always on the move, travelling with his people, calling them to fresh adventures, directing them as they travelled. He was the 'pilgrim God' and his people were a 'pilgrim people'.

It was this God to which the Israelites were unfaithful. They had neglected his Law by rejecting the prophets who had been sent to them just as they rejected Moses in the wilderness. The present generation of Israel's leaders were no better. 'You stiff necked generation' began our reading from Acts. Not exactly the best way to address the high court of Judaism! They too were stubborn because they, like their ancestors, resisted the work of the Holy Spirit and the rest of the story we know.

So what of us? How can we relate to Stephen? Isn't his position in Christian history as the very first martyr, one which is beyond us as we try to apply his life to our own lives? No, I don't think so. As I finish, three things to take home with us.

First of all, we are reminded of the mystery of God's grace and work in a hopeless situation. An outstanding disciple and a tragic death, yet the beginning of something new. Before Stephen's martyrdom the church was growing but centred around Jerusalem. Stephen's death unleashed a persecution of the church and many disciples fled into Judea and into Samaria. They took with them the Gospel and so the mission of the church into the wider world began.

If there was one thing that triggered Stephen's violent death, it was his criticism of the Jewish Temple. His death is a vivid illustration of the mysterious working of God's grace even through human wickedness. Not least, standing by was a young man called Saul. It was through the mystery of grace that he was converted and became the apostle to the Gentiles, not many months later. The martyrdom of Stephen was a pivotal point in the spread of Christianity throughout the world. May we know the mystery of the grace of God through Jesus Christ at work in the difficulties of our own lives so that his kingdom may grow around us.

But also, we have a reminder of the nature of the God whom we worship this morning. He is the God who travels with his people, who travels with us as he did with the patriarchs and with Stephen himself. Each step along the way of our lives into each new situation, into the unknown and the new. Next weekend, as we travel into the new year, God makes that transition with us. We don't somehow leave God behind in the old year but he comes with us, leading us and encouraging us. God understands the feeling of fear we may

have about the future. He does not take away the things about which we may be afraid but travelling with us he gives us the strength and courage to face them, and he can give us the experience of peace.

Finally, Stephen's martyrdom asks of each one of us how far are we prepared to go in following Christ? We may say, well that's a pointless question because we are in a completely different situation! We are never likely to face the level of opposition which Stephen faced.

Well that may be true and that's why I started with the context of the other feast days after Christmas. There will always be opposition to the spread of the Gospel. Look at what is happening to Christians today in the middle east and in the Asian subcontinent. It is still possible, like Stephen, that we shall find ourselves in the front line, actively defending the Gospel. It is also possible that we may suffer for the cause of Christ without consciously putting ourselves forward like the Holy Innocents. More likely we shall be like St John, Christians who desire to serve Christ and bears the cost, but who are protected from the physical sufferings of actual martyrdom.

Notice that Stephen's death imitates the death of Jesus. As his death Jesus absorbed the wickedness of the world, so did Stephen. When Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit', so he echoes Jesus' words from the cross. Likewise, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. As Jesus knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane, so Stephen knelt when he prayed.

Each of us are called to enter into the death and resurrection of Christ that is symbolised by baptism: for Stephen it was a literal entering but for us we enter into Christ's death and resurrection daily by the way we live and give up our lives for others and for God.

Most of all, let us with Stephen, and like Jesus before him, share in that vision of the glory of God and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. The Creeds tell us that the risen and ascended Jesus *sits* at the right hand of God. Stephen's vision is of the Christ, the one who represents the whole of humanity, who stands, welcoming his first martyr. The heavens opening reveal the destiny of all who follow Christ into his death. This is our destiny, as it was that of Stephen, and all the martyrs we commemorate at this time of year. Christ stands to welcome each of us into the presence of God, this day and every day of our lives.

The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby