

## ST STEPHEN, PROTO MARTYR

Acts 7. 51-60

Galatians 2. 16b-20

Matthew 10. 17-22

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

All that is known of St Stephen's life is found in chapters 6 and 7 of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. He is reckoned as the first Christian martyr: the *proto-martyr*. Although his name comes from the Greek word for 'crown', Stephen was a Jew by birth. He would have been born outside Palestine and raised as a Greek-speaking Jew. The New Testament does not record the circumstances of his conversion to Christianity.

Stephen first appears as one of the seven deacons chosen in response to protests by Hellenist (or Greek-speaking) Christians that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of alms. The apostles were too busy preaching the word of God to deal with this problem, so they commissioned seven men from among the Hellenists, 'of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom' (6. 3), then prayed and laid hands on them. Stephen, the first among the seven, is described as 'full of faith and of the Holy Spirit' (6. 5). A few verses later, Stephen is said to be 'full of grace and power (and doing) great wonders and signs among the people' (6. 8).

Clearly, St Stephen was a man of exceptionally fine character, with miracle-working power and abilities of teaching and preaching. Although just a deacon, he had received divine gifting apparently equal to that of the apostles. Some Jews from Greek-speaking synagogues debated with Stephen about the gospel of Christ and were not able to overcome his wisdom. In their anger, they had Stephen arrested

and dragged before the Jewish council on unjust charges of blasphemy against the Law of Moses and against God.

Speaking in his own defence, Stephen showed his profound knowledge of the Scriptures and the history of Judaism. He recounts the Old Testament stories as a litany of God's forbearance in the face of Israel's persistent disloyalty to the Abrahamic covenant and ungratefulness for God's mercy. Then, after saying 'the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands' (7. 48), Stephen denounced his audience for always resisting the Holy Spirit and for murdering the promised Messiah.

With that, his accusers were overcome with rage, took him out of the city, and stoned him to death. While they were taking him away, Stephen had a vision of heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. As he was dying, Stephen said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (7. 59) and 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (7. 60). A man named Saul (later to become St Paul) watched the whole thing with approval.

There was no official tomb of St Stephen until 415 CE, when a priest named Lucian claimed to have discovered it by revelation at Kafr Gamala, north of Jerusalem. Stephen's relics were translated first to Constantinople and then to Rome, where they are believed to lie in the Basilica of St Lawrence Outside the Walls.

From very early on, St Stephen was the patron saint of deacons. He is also the patron saint of bricklayers and stone masons. His feast day is celebrated on 26<sup>th</sup> December in the Western churches and on 27<sup>th</sup> December in the East. Some theologians think it possible that, except for Easter and Holy Week, the Feast of Stephen is the oldest feast day in the Christian calendar.

The English word ‘martyr’ comes from the Greek word ‘martus’ (μάρτυρ), which means ‘witness’. A martyr is a witness, a witness to something beyond and more than himself or herself. As someone<sup>1</sup> once wrote, a martyr is ‘the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God ... desiring nothing for himself’, and wanting only what God wills to be. That is the witness to which we are all called, in one way or another.

St. Stephen the proto-martyr is the one who shows us the shape and meaning of martyrdom, and what witness truly means. And what is that exactly? Being stoned to death? No. The martyr is the one who suffers for, and in the name of the One who suffered and died for us. The martyr is the one who allows the spirit of Christ to shape his or her very being, at all times, and up until the hour of our death. ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’, Stephen prays and, then on his knees, he ‘cried out in a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them’ (7. 60). His words echo the words of Christ on the Cross, words of forgiveness and commendation. ‘Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing’ (Lk 23. 34) ; and ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ (Lk 23. 46).

Stephen shows us what it means to worship and adore the child Christ. It means to let his life become *our life* and to shape our words and deeds. As St John put it in his first epistle (4. 9), ‘God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might *live through him*’. On this day after Christmas, Stephen illustrates the deep meaning of Christ’s birth. Our Lord has come for our salvation. He has come to redeem our humanity, to recall us to who we are in the sight of God, who is our life. Today, let us resolve afresh to live our lives through him; and *to derive our very life from him and in him*.

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<sup>1</sup> T S Eliot in his drama *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. His being 'with us' challenges us to think afresh about the meaning of our being 'with him'. We who are with him are called to a life of discipleship; we are called to witness that God is with us.

In the appointed gospel passage for today, Christ makes it abundantly clear that persecution and suffering may indeed be part of the Christian witness, especially in a blind and dark world. Christian witness is never about comfort.

In T S Eliot's drama, *Murder in the Cathedral*, there is an interlude between the two parts of the play. The interlude takes the form of a sermon that Eliot imagines Thomas à Becket, the 12th century Archbishop of Canterbury, giving on Christmas morning in the year 1170.

'Consider also one thing of which you have probably never thought', the Archbishop says. 'Not only do we at the feast of Christmas celebrate at once Our Lord's Birth and His Death', (by which he means Mass or Holy Communion), 'but on the next day', this day, 'we celebrate the martyrdom of his first martyr, the blessed Stephen. Is it an accident, do you think, that the day of the first martyr follows immediately the day of the Birth of Christ? By no means. Just as we rejoice and mourn at once, in the Birth and in the Passion of Our Lord; so also, in a smaller figure, we both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs. We mourn, for the sins of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice, that another soul is numbered among the Saints in heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men'.

'Beloved', he goes on to say, 'we do not think of a martyr simply as a good Christian who has been killed because he is a Christian: for that would be solely to mourn. We do not think of him simply as a good Christian who has been elevated to the company of the Saints: for that would be simply to rejoice: and neither our mourning nor our rejoicing is as the world's is. A Christian martyrdom is no accident' ... 'A

martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God, for his love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to his ways...So thus... the Church mourns and rejoices at once, in a fashion that the world cannot understand’.

Amen.