

THE FEAST OF ST STEPHEN

Acts 7. 51-60

Galatians 2. 16b-20

Matthew 23. 34-49

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

Today we commemorate the Feast of St Stephen, the patron saint of our parish. We don't know a lot about Stephen – he first appears by name in Acts chapter 6, where he is one of seven men deacons described as 'being of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom' who were appointed by the early Church to care for Christian Greek (rather than Jewish) widows. The role of these seven men has traditionally been described as serving at table; but as someone has rightly pointed out, you are not martyred by religious authorities for serving food to elderly ladies; so there must have been more to the deacon's role than that. Some scholars suggest these seven men had financial and teaching responsibilities among the widows and in the Church's public ministry; and this suggestion seems credible, given that another description of Stephen in Acts portrays him as being 'full of grace and power' and doing 'great wonders and signs among the people' (6. 8).

Whatever Stephen's exact ministry was, it provoked opposition from members of a synagogue called the 'synagogue of the Freedmen', who stood up and argued with him – which incidentally is another sign that his ministry was in the public realm. Unable to get the better of Stephen, they resorted to accusations of blasphemy and stirred up unrest among the people and the religious leaders. Then they suddenly brought him before a religious Tribunal to face false accusations of speaking against the Jewish Temple and the Torah. We are told that when the members of the Tribunal looked intently at Stephen, they saw that his face was like that of an angel, a messenger of God.

In Stephen's speech to the Tribunal or Council, the ending of which we have just heard in our first reading, a summary is given of the Old Testament story, describing how God had worked through and with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon. Stephen didn't say anything particularly controversial; but in the last few sentences of his speech, he suddenly accused his listeners of not keeping the law of God, opposing the Holy Spirit and betraying and murdering the Righteous One, Jesus. That was enough to send them into a frenzy of anger; and they stoned him to death. Stephen therefore became the first Christian martyr. The members of the early Christian church had been warned to expect opposition, and some people had already been imprisoned; but now they saw that holding the Christian faith had become literally a matter of life and death.

We may indeed ask ourselves, why is Stephen's story is recalled each year on the day just after Christmas? The Church began commemorating St Stephen in the fourth century and probably placed his feast day close to Christmas in order to honour him as the first person to die for our Saviour, whose incarnation was just celebrated. Our forebears in the young Christian Church understood the radical impact that Christ's incarnation had on the world: for those who received our Lord and who believed in his name (to use the words of our Gospel reading at Midnight Mass), 'he gave power to become the children of God' (Jn 1. 12). But our forebears also knew (as you and I do) that some people refuse to accept and know the Christ. To quote the words of St John's gospel once again, '(Christ) was in the world...yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (Jn 1. 10-11).

On St Stephen's Day, we have the opportunity to think again about our own response to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and about the way in which we follow him. Stephen's death stands as an eternal testimony to his costly obedience. He was a very faithful imitator of our Lord; and there are many parallels that can be drawn between

his life and that of Jesus. Both were filled with the Holy Spirit; both were unjustly accused; and both were martyred for their obedience and for their devotion to the redemptive purposes of God. Just as our dying Lord commended his spirit to the Father, so did Stephen commit his spirit to the Jesus. Just as our Lord asked forgiveness for his persecutors in Gethsemane, so did Stephen cry out, 'Lord, do not hold this against them'.

Earlier in the service, as we prayed the words of the Collect together, we prayed that we might seek to follow Stephen's example: 'grant that in all our sufferings for the truth we may learn to love even our enemies and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt, looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us, Jesus our mediator and advocate.'

Now it is unlikely that any of us sitting in St Stephen's today will face martyrdom because of our faith. However, we never know what will happen; or where our faith will lead us.

But it is entirely possible that we have already faced, or that we will face situations where we are tempted to abandon our commitment to Christ because of opposition; because it is simply easier not to be known as a Christian. As philosopher Peter Kreeft has written: 'If you confess at a fashionable cocktail party that you are plotting to overthrow the government, or that you are a PLO terrorist...or that you molest porcupines or bite bats' heads off, you will soon attract a buzzing, fascinated, sympathetic circle of listeners. But if you confess that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, you will find yourself suddenly alone, with a distinct chill in the air.' (*Fundamentals of the Faith*, 1988, p. 74).

The same chill in the air might happen to us if we confess to our friends, colleagues and neighbours that we really believe the words of the Christmas carols we have just

sung this season; or if we take a public position in favour of godly, Christian principles; or if we start humbly serving others for Christ, as Stephen did.

Yes, if we do any of these things, there will surely be consequences. The young Christian Church knew this, and has given us feast days like today to think about it. At Christmas and on the Feast of St Stephen, we are invited not only to recognise the glory of the incarnation and the glory of the Word became flesh; we are invited (or should I say challenged) to let Christ, the Word made flesh, speak through us; to speak through our words; to speak through our lives, to speak through our actions and our witness. And as we witness the glory of the revelation of God in the birth of our Saviour at Christmas, we are called to say 'yes' again to God and to the cost of following him.

There is a small but important detail in Stephen's story that we would be careless to overlook. Before he was hauled out of the city and stoned to death, and as he continued his faithful witness before the Tribunal, Stephen was allowed to envision the glory of God and to see our Lord standing at the right hand of the Father. At unexpected times in our own lives, as we stand firm as disciples of our Lord, we too can expect that we will experience something of the glory of God. The heavens, in a sense, will be opened; and we will know that our Lord is with us, before us and supporting us as we demonstrate our obedience and faithfulness to him. For this, we can say, 'thanks be to God'.

Amen.