

## ST STEPHEN, DEACON AND FIRST 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.

Dear friends, today we gather to honour our patron saint, St Stephen. In the Church calendar, 26<sup>th</sup> December is the day set aside to commemorate his Festival; but you might not be aware that another day also used to be set aside in the Church calendar to remember him. Up until 1960, the third of August was designated as the day to commemorate the finding of St Stephen's body. The body of St Stephen was discovered in the year 415, along with those of Gamaliel, his son Abibo, and Nicodemus, when Gamaliel appeared to Lucian, a priest of Jerusalem, and revealed the place of their collective burial. Relics of Stephen were brought to many places throughout the world; and in the final book of *The City of God*, St Augustine describes a number of miracles that took place when a part of them came to Africa, including the raising from the dead of six people. Another portion of the relics was brought to Rome in the reign of Pope Pelagius II (579-90), who placed them in the basilica of St Lawrence-outside-the-Walls, in the tomb of St Lawrence himself.<sup>1</sup> If ever you are in Rome, it is still possible to visit the tomb today.

I wonder, why would Pope Pelagius have decided to bury St Stephen alongside St Lawrence? Actually, there is a rather straightforward explanation. SS Stephen and Lawrence are often associated together because of the parallels in their lives and deaths. Both were deacons under the authority of the Pope in their respective cities, Stephen in Jerusalem under St Peter, and Lawrence in Rome under St Sixtus II, the

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<sup>1</sup> According to the *Golden Legend*, a collection of hagiographies by Blessed Jacobus de Varagine that was widely read in late medieval Europe, when the Pope went to lay the relics of St Stephen in St Lawrence's tomb, the Roman martyr moved to one side to make room for his fellow Levite.

most venerated of the early popes martyred after Peter. Both Stephen and Lawrence were put in charge of the Church's charitable activities by the Popes whom they served, and both were eloquent preachers of the Christian faith. Both suffered terrible martyrdoms, Stephen by stoning, as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, while Lawrence was roasted alive.

I thought that it might be interesting to focus today not so much on Stephen's martyrdom (as important as that is), but rather on his diaconate, that is, his role as a deacon.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke writes in chapter 6<sup>2</sup> of the appointment of Stephen to the office of deacon. In Jerusalem during the days of the early Christian Church, the number of disciples was increasing. But it appears that some non-Jewish, Greek-speaking believers, called 'Hellenists', complained to the Jewish believers<sup>3</sup> because the Hellenist widows<sup>4</sup> were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The twelve apostles (including Matthias, who had been selected to replace Judas) called the whole community of disciples together and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables'. They then asked that seven men<sup>5</sup> be chosen, men who were of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, who could be appointed to this task, so that the apostles could continue their ministry of prayer and serving the word.

It was then that Stephen, 'a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit' was chosen; and alongside him were named Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Acts 6. 1-7.

<sup>3</sup> Called 'Hebrews' in the text, meaning that they primarily spoke Aramaic.

<sup>4</sup> The Hellenist 'widows' of Acts combine two welfare classes: they are widows and resident aliens, without family or national support. If by 'Hellenist' Luke means those who speak mostly Greek in a Semitic culture, their inability to speak the native language would push these widows to Jerusalem's social and economic fringe. Because of the conflict between the Temple elites and the Twelve, the welfare system operated by the Temple might also have been placed outside the grasp of these poorest of the poor.

<sup>5</sup> The number seven is not arbitrary but reflects the Jewish practice of choosing seven members to provide oversight to local congregations (cf. Ex 18. 21; Num 27. 18-19).

Nicolaus. Although the Seven are not called ‘deacons’ in the New Testament, their role is described as ‘diaconal’ (διακονειν τροπεζαις in Greek), and they are therefore often regarded as the forerunners of the Christian order of deacons.

Precious little information is given to us in the book of Acts about what Stephen and the others actually did in their diaconal roles; Luke, the author of that book, prefers to concentrate on Stephen’s courageous and powerful witness, which ultimately led to his martyrdom by his Hellenistic Jewish opponents.

However, given that Stephen was just as much deacon as he was proto-martyr, we are right to consider what his role as deacon involved. The word ‘deacon’ in English is derived from a Greek word which literally means to ‘serve at tables’ (6. 2) or to ‘distribute food’ (6. 1, ‘diakonein’). The Greek word is also used in another verse of Acts 6 to describe ‘the ministry of the word’ (6. 4, ‘diakonia’).

There is therefore a broad spectrum of activities described here, ranging from social work in something like a soup kitchen to the apostolic proclamation of the gospel. In light of this, we now see that the issue that led to the nomination of Stephen and the six other ‘deacons’ was not only the fact that some of the Greek-speaking widows in Jerusalem were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food; they were also being overlooked in the daily preaching of the Word.

As speakers of Greek, and furthermore as widows who were without the same freedom as Jewish women to take part in the kind of public life that Temple worship was, the Hellenist widows were neither free to attend the large gatherings in the Temple forecourts, nor were they linguistically equipped to understand what these Aramaic-speaking preachers were saying when they returned from the Temple to speak in the intimacy of the household.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the Hellenist widows were in

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Acts 5. 42.

need of preachers who could teach them in Greek, and preferably at home when Greek-speakers came together at their tables.<sup>7</sup>

What does this allow us to conclude about the seven men (including Stephen) who were appointed in Acts 6? We can now say that the Seven were a new group, not only of men involved in social work, but also a new group of preachers, directed at first to the needs of Greek-speaking believers in Jerusalem. We are told that thanks to their work and ministry, ‘the word of God continued to spread; (and) the number of the disciples increased greatly’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Stephen proved to be a brilliant preacher, and heroically gave up his life in his commitment to the proclamation of the gospel.

As we all know, in his martyrdom, Stephen imitated our Lord in so many ways; and this can also be said of Stephen in his diaconate. As a deacon, St Stephen clearly imitated the ministry of our Lord who reminded his disciples, ‘... I am among you as the one who serves’.<sup>9</sup>

May God give us grace to imitate St Stephen. May we become true servants of one another and of the Church; and may we learn to speak eloquently and convincingly about the good news.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Acts 6. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Acts 6. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lk 22. 27.