

| ADDRESS | 26 December 2021 | Stephen Deacon & Martyr |
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| 2 Chronicles 24.17-22 | <i>May the Lord avenge</i> | Lord, let us hear your voice in the Scriptures, today and every day. We ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN. |
| Psalms 31.1-8 | | |
| Acts 6.8-10, 7.54-60 | The death of Stephen | |
| Matthew 10.16-23 | Sheep among wolves | |

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

What a difference a day makes! We go from the joyous birth of the Saviour to the gruesome death of the first martyr; today we see Stephen facing his accusers, strong in the strength of the God he served. We hear him forgiving his murderers with his last breath.

People who are persecuted can respond in different ways to their persecutors – they can hate, or they can love; they can curse or they can forgive. Joy and sorrow are two sides of the coin, in the world as God made it. As the Psalmist says, *Darkness is as light to you* (Ps. 139.1)

There's a dramatic contrast between today's Old Testament reading and the New Testament reading; the contrast, between *May the Lord see and avenge* and *Lord, do not hold this sin against them*. A cry for revenge -- a cry of forgiveness

The Old Testament reading is a glimpse of Jewish history, of the continual struggles between supporters of the king and the high priest, at a time when both offices were hereditary, and between the worshippers of idols and the worshippers of YHWH.

The New Testament reading takes us 30 or 33 years beyond the first Christmas and the first Easter, to a time when, as the book of Acts tells us, *The Word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.* (Acts 6.7).

Stephen was one of the church's first seven deacons, appointed to distribute food and other necessities to the widows and other poor members of the growing Christian community. He was arrested and murdered for proclaiming his allegiance to his Master, for telling the Jews that they were condemned for not accepting Jesus as their Messiah.

But, as he died, *Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* He had become for first of thousands, perhaps millions, who have died for their faith.

History records many stories of good men and women who suffered unjustly, but who turned darkness into light by forgiving their enemies. Only this month, a new book was published about the two-year ordeal of Cardinal George Pell, who spent more than a year in jail for a crime which simply could not have happened in the way the prosecution said it had, in the place the prosecution said it had.

Professor Ross Fitzgerald, reviewing the book, calls Pell 'a man of sorrows', echoing the words of Isaiah, a man who endured a harrowing trial and an unjust verdict, as his Lord had centuries earlier. Fitzgerald argues that George Pell bore the collective guilt for the sexual crimes and abuses of others.

Truly, he, too, was a sheep among wolves. The media portrayed him as guilty long before he faced a court. Daniel Andrews condemned Tony Abbott for visiting him in jail. He spent much of his time in jail praying for his accusers, and for all those who had been victims of sexual abuse, and for the perpetrators, until the seven judges of the High Court unanimously quashed his conviction.

There are many stories like this from two millennia of Christian witness, most of them unrecorded. George Pell's story has particular significance for me, because I once interviewed him as part of my research for an academic paper.

We all have days of darkness as well as days of light. Friends move away, we become ill, we suffer pain, we lose our job or a loved one dies. Yet Christ is with us, ready to share our burdens, making them easier to bear.

Our children brighten our lives with their love, but they give us pain as well, as they grow up and depend on us less and less. But we love them regardless, in darkness as in light. However, the latest figures show that Australians are having fewer and fewer children, but more and more pets. Apparently they think a dog can give as much affection as a child, but a dog is a lot less expensive, and a lot less trouble.

We don't know why the Western church chose the day after Christmas to honour the memory of St Stephen, perhaps just because of this contrast between light and darkness. On Christmas Day we celebrate the Son of God coming from heaven to earth in humility; the following day we commemorate a man of God going from earth to heaven in triumph. *Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*

In English-speaking countries, today is known as Boxing Day, because of an old English custom of making this day a day of giving to others. After spending Christmas Day at home; many wealthy families would visit the homes of their servants the following day with small gifts, to thank them for

their work during the year. Many masters would put money into the earthenware 'banks' or boxes of their apprentices, to show their thanks for their work. The first piggy banks.

Christmas Day was about the birth of the Saviour, and about family; the following day was about others. This is probably why *Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen* has become one of our favourite Christmas carols, although it is not really a Christmas song at all.

The words were written by a high church Anglican priest, John Mason Neale. He set them to the tune of an old Easter hymn from Finland. Neale wrote many books and wrote and translated dozens of hymns. Some are still well-known: *All glory, laud and honour* and *Good Christian men, Rejoice*; and *O come, O come Emmanuel*. Neale also suffered for his convictions. He revived several Anglican orders against strong opposition and was attacked by a crowd at a funeral of one of his sisters and badly injured.

Wenceslas was the duke of Bohemia, for 12 years, until 935, when he was murdered by his brother, who took his place as duke. After his death, Wenceslas was declared to be a king, and later a saint, and he is honoured as the patron saint of the Czech republic. The Saint Wenceslas Chorale is the country's unofficial anthem, like *Waltzing Matilda* is for us, and his saint's day in September is a public holiday.

Stephen's story is a reminder that the Christian life is always joyous, but it can be painful. We sing about the child in the manger, but also about the love which can *lead us all with hearts aflame unto the joys above us*, as the carol says.

For most people today Boxing Day has lost its focus on giving-- it's become another day for self and family, hunting for bargains at the Boxing Day sales, or watching cricket or the yacht race to Hobart, or visiting, or just relaxing after a hectic Christmas. But we can keep the giving focus as followers of Jesus.

His birth encourages us to work for a world in which men and women are no longer killed for their religious or political convictions. We are commanded to follow his example of self-giving-- as Stephen did, as Wenceslas is said to have done.

By making this another day of living for others, it becomes another Christmas. We may or may not suffer for our faith in some way, but we will all be rewarded, as Stephen was – *Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. #*

Lord, we praise you for being our great example, from birth to death and beyond, and we give thanks for all your saints who have lived and died for you. Be with us in our times of trial and help us to forgive others as we have been forgiven. Amen