

Saint Stephen's Day 2021, Acts 7.51-end

One of the stranger things you become aware of as a Christian, in my case as a 23-year-old Christian is that Christmas Day the great feast we celebrate is immediately followed by St Stephen's Day. We can't catch our breath and rest in Christmas, instead we are reminded by the placing of St Stephen's Day the day after Christmas Day of a world that kills the prophets, but much more as well. A world of possibility, but also of threat and danger.

Stephen is to be silenced. What he sees and speaks of is so abhorrent to the hearers that first they grind their teeth, then they close their ears and finally they seize him and stone him to death. If you are observant you will have noticed that underneath the Christ figure who dominates the three panels of the East window of Christ Church there is a shield representing the stoning of Stephen, deacon, first martyr.

Stephen is the patron saint of Vienna after whom the Vienna cathedral is named. It is for this reason he finds a place in our window amongst the soldier saints of George and Martin, who remind us that there is a struggle. There is warfare. It is above all else spiritual. It is to be carried out in a particular way by Christians, as Stephen's speech and especially his prayer remind us, as he prays for those who are stoning him, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' This is a startling outcome of and response to the young Christian faith. 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' What presence of mind! What selflessness! Let us understand this prayer in light of another of Stephen's prayers. The one that immediately precedes it when he says, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Stephen has confidence in God.

In Vienna men are often ordained to the order of deacons in the Steffl as the cathedral is lovingly referred to by the Viennese. Steffl is a derivative of Stephen. It has been the custom for more than twenty years to ordain *virī probati* (proven men) as deacons although they are married. A few things worth noting as an aside. One, the *virī probati* are older usually in their fifties plus. Two, they have a proven record of faithfulness to their wives and the communities in which they live their faith. Three, they have proven themselves in their professions. Some are postmen, others are managers, and there is much in between. As an aside it is worth bearing that the first of the three orders is open to married men. The question facing the Roman Catholic Church is, will they open the second order to married men as well. This is an urgent question for them.

But I want on this second day of Christmas, St Stephen's Day, to proceed by highlighting briefly that Stephen was a deacon. The deacon's task in the nascent church was to help with the distribution of food for widows and other needy persons.

Right at the outset the earliest Christian community is a community that is seen as caring for one another coupled with an urgent message that needs to be communicated. In this we find a challenge to how we think and are. Our giving to external charities has the look of unselfish giving. A giving not circumscribed in any way, but in so doing we can fail to care for those in our midst.

The choosing of the seven deacons was out of necessity to free the apostles to get on with other work. Work needs to be prioritised. Let's ground this for a moment. I am aware of this tension. I am uniquely placed because *one*, of being ordained and *two*, of being the appointed chaplain.* I find that I can spend an inordinate amount of time in administration and not enough time out or concentrating on 'prayer and the Ministry of the Word'.

It is not surprising to me that cathedrals and leading parishes with much larger congregations than Christ Church Vienna have administrators, and often in a cathedral one of the residentiary canons is in charge of the worship. These are necessary. They are not luxury. Of course one can see that administration is ministry – for what is administration but to minister – but the Apostolic Church was also clear that it had a message to proclaim and that some people were uniquely situated and hopefully qualified to do so.

Stephen's speech, which is the longest in Acts, tells a story of which today we only heard the ending. It is the story that we have been rehearsing since the beginning of Advent with the Advent Lessons and Carols service and the service of Nine Lessons and Carols, as well as the keeping of the four Sundays of Advent and the singing of O come, O come Emmanuel. Leading to our celebrations of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us, so that we might behold its glory.

The day after Christmas we celebrate first St Stephen the first martyr of the Church. And the day after we celebrate St John, the author of St John's Gospel and the community that stands behind this articulation of the faith in philosophical terms that allow a 19th century English parish priest to compose these words, "And when in the eternal wisdom of God the fulness of time came for which the ages had been waiting, then that hour struck which never can be struck again, and GOD the SON leapt out of Eternity into Time across the hills of frankincense and the mountains of myrrh and was born amongst us— born of a woman, was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger." Advent, Christmas Day, St Stephen's Day and St John's Day are programme. They want to communicate a message that is embedded in the whole of the Christian year.

Two more things. I spoke earlier about some of the criteria that are required in the choosing of deacons. I would not want us to lose sight of the criteria of the Apostolic

Church, “What the Apostles said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a person full of faith and the Holy Spirit, ...”.

Finally, I want to direct our attention back to the stained-glass window that thrones over the open the space of the church building and to the depiction of Stephen’s stoning. Looking at that cameo I am reminded of an Advent calendar, where a door has been opened. The cameo is surrounded by what looks by paper that has been scrolled back so that we can see the stoning. This way of depicting the stoning is intentional. Looking on Stephen’s stoning we are to reminded of what is central to today’s Acts reading. It is the opening of heaven. How does the Evangelist capture this in words? He writes, ‘... filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.’ Look ‘he said, **‘I see the heavens opened** and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’

We can’t be 100% sure what offended those who stoned Stephen to death. Was it that the heavens are opened? Is it that Jesus is standing at the right hand of God? Is it because through Jesus the crucified, risen and ascended Lord the heavens are opened meaning Jesus’ life accomplishes something? Is it more the place of honour in which Stephen sees Jesus ‘standing at the right hand of God’? We must assume both accompanied possibly by crowd hysteria. To those who stone Stephen this vision is so offensive, blasphemous that Stephen must be forever silenced, but what is given him through faith, through the strengthening by the Holy Spirit as advocate and guide, is the vision leading to the response we are always being asked to make our own whether we think of ourselves as of little fover aith, or of some faith or ‘full of faith’. In our hour and our hours of trial may we also be ready to pray, confident in God, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ and have the grace to pray if the situation requires it. ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’

Given the enormity of the above I wonder what those deacons are thinking and feeling as they prostrate themselves before the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna? Called as they are to emulate in their daily lives something of Stephen’s selfless faith. A faith able to pray for others emulating Jesus’ own witness from the cross. He whom we follow, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ Stephen has learnt well. May the deacons learn well. Let us pray for them. May we who are online and gathered in church learn well from Jesus and Stephen and do likewise!

In ending I quote from the last verse of the Christmas carol ‘Once in royal David’s city’ that segues beautifully with Stephen’s vision,

Not in that poor lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see him: but in heaven,

Set at God's right hand on high,
Where like stars his children crowned,
All in white shall wait around.

End

*You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged²¹ and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened. Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

From the ordination rite of the Church of England.