

St Stephen 2021

On Christmass Eve I engaged with the emotional, sentimental side of Christmas, through the world of Dickens. Canon Scott reminded yesterday of Christmas enchantment. Today, we continue our celebrations in a very different vein. It is an extraordinary festival, I don't think that any other religious festival has become so overlaid with cultural baggage, certainly not in the west. We are all caught up in it to some degree, even if it is simply grumbling about 'Winter Wonderland' playing in the shops so loudly that you can't understand the person in the shop as they mumble behind their mask and as the sweat rolls down your back!

So much has this festival been appropriated by 'the world' it is crucial for us in the Church to really engage with what it means, and its context, then and now. So it is important that we commemorate St Stephen today because in Stephen we can glimpse what this festival really means as we enter the world the world of 1st century Christianity and importantly as we see this new movement through the eyes of Saul. You'll recall from our reading this morning from Acts: 'Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.'

The involvement of Saul of Tarsus in the martyrdom of Stephen is one of the most interesting and ironically tragic events recorded in the early history of the Church. Today we celebrate Stephen, a young and zealous representative of this vibrant and exciting new movement preaching, no doubt, of the freedom and universality of the Gospel. And we can see in his message and his willingness suffer for it, the inspiration for Saul to become Paul and to go on to preach the same message that freedom and universality and in his time to suffer and to die for that message.

The idea of martyrdom today is something that we can barely contemplate, such is the modern idea of the religious martyr as a weapon. But the words of Tertullian that early Christian apologist 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church' rings true. Clearly their witness, the meaning of the word martyr, was an extraordinary motivating factor in the spread of the faith. And that faith has always challenged tyranny and persecution, the imposition of uniformity, laws prohibiting worship, the translating of scriptures. The martyrs from the early Church through to the Reformation and to our own time generally suffered because of a toxic mix of religious and political tyranny.

In the 1640's under the Puritanical rule of Cromwell Christmass in England was abolished and replaced by a series of fast days! One year Christmas day coincided with one of these fast days and Parliament ordered that the fast be kept (and I quote) 'with the more solemn humiliation, because it may call to remembrance our sins, and the sins of our forefathers, who have turned this feast, pretending [to] the memory of Christ, into an extreme forgetfulness of him, by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights.' We can, I think, appreciate why the Puritans reacted in this way, given our own experiences of Christmas in the 21st century but it missed something; it lacked that emotional, even sentimental engagement, certainly enchantment was not on the menu!

Christmass for all its faults in our time: the consumerism, the lack of understanding of its message, Rudolph the red nosed reindeer, speaks to us profoundly of freedom and universality of the gospel, it speaks to us of the accessibility of God. Emmanuel, God with us. The reaction of Herod to the birth of Jesus in the slaughter of the innocents, perhaps the first martyrs, is a reminder to us of the reaction of the political authorities to the birth of Christ and the threat that it represented. Access to God for all is a grave threat to good order, religious or civil: 'they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.'

Christmass with its stories of shepherds, the lowest caste and the accounts of strangers from the east being drawn into the world of God; the God who in turn will become refugee, the God who will challenge the religious and civil authorities and will in turn become a martyr is a powerful antidote to the issues of our day, issues of division based on ethnicity or economics. It is the message that we proclaim and witness to amidst the attempts of the world to shroud the message in the distraction of excess: shopping and eating and drinking!

The Feast of Stephen is firmly fixed in the canon through the carol of our introit today, Good King Wenceslas in it we can today engage in a heady mix of emotion and enchantment. But as Thomas a Kempis reminded us we are sometimes stirred by emotion and mistake it for zeal. Today then is important because we are reminded of the birth of the Christ *and* of the witness to that birth by the martyrs, today particularly Stephen and Agnes (and Paul). Their witness to the faith through the giving of their lives is the example and imperative for us to reach out to all people and to witness to the faith in our time with the message of freedom and inclusion.

A very happy Christmas Season to you all and every blessing for the New Year.
Amen.