

Homily for the Sunday after Christmas 2020 St Stephen the Deacon and Martyr



The Homily comes to us from Fr Stephen Smuts, Regional Dean of the Western Cape Region.

“May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable to Thee, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen”

Even though Christmas Day has passed by, it’s not too late for a good ‘ole Christmas Carol, now is it (since we are, after-all, still in the Season of Christmastide)?

“Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the Feast of Stephen, When the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even; Brightly shone the moon that night, tho’ the frost was cruel, When a poor man came in sight, gath’ring winter fuel...”

The Carol, originally written by John Mason Neale, an English hymn writer, back in 1853, is based on the Finnish song, “*Tempus adest floridum*” (“*The time for flowering is near*”). It has the story of a Bohemian King going on a journey and braving harsh winter weather to give alms to a poor peasant on the Feast of St. Stephen. King Wenceslas, himself, was later declared to be both a Martyr and a Saint, and the Carol purposes to remind us that the giving spirit of Christmas should not happen just on that day!

It is interesting, however, that the events recounted in the Carol take place on the Feast Day of another Martyr and Saint — in fact, he is the first Martyr of the Church: St. Stephen. My favourite Saint (and namesake), the story of St. Stephen is in the Acts of the Apostles, where he is found making a bold stand and a strong apology before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:8–7:59). As a young Deacon, filled with the Holy Spirit, St. Stephen was one of the first Christians to actually go out and wholeheartedly follow the teaching of the Apostles.

His eloquent and spirited defence of the Christian faith before an antagonistic rabbinic court, enraged his audience (Act 7:54). As a result, he was removed, dragged out of the city of Jerusalem, and brutally stoned to death (Acts 7:57–58). While this was happening, the Bible recalls, that St. Stephen, “*being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God”.*” (Acts 7:55–56). What an absolutely glorious vision!!

Being pelted with stones, “*Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”* (Acts 7:59). Dying, he fell to his knees, and cried out: “*Lord do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*” (Acts 7:60). His final words, are a prayer of forgiveness, and they echo those of Jesus on the Cross (Luke 23:34).

I am glad we get the opportunity to reflect on the martyrdom of St. Stephen as 2020 draws to a close... I think many of us will gladly see the end of this unprecedented year, a year that held so much suffering, so much pain, anxiety, separation, and so much death, as we faced the ravishing effects of a global pandemic. Even now, we find ourselves standing during a surging “Second COVID-19 wave.” [As I pen this homily, I do so

from within the confines of quarantine: Unable to go outside, unable to physically minister to others, unable to do Church... The things I enjoy and truly live for!]

It would be easy for one to become consternated, saddened, despondent, and even depressed, by all the things that are going on around us and by that which we have been (and are) going through this year. But then again, we would do well to look at and follow the example of a youthful early-Church leader, Stephen, who's work it was to supervise the distribution of food amongst the needy and overlooked...who, despite the dangerous circumstances of his day, was sensitive and compassionate towards others, and strived for excellence, even in the smallest of assignments. His words reflect just how, in the shortest of time, he had moulded himself and become so much like his Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

St. Stephen's life is a continual challenge to all of us as Christian believers: Despite that which we are experiencing, no matter how bleak or dire, would we be willing to do and stand for Jesus? Has Christ not promised us that living for Him in this world will lead to many troubles (cf. Luke 21:12-19). But all the same, we should, like St. Stephen, nevertheless, live boldly and faithfully for Him!

Deacons: This is your Patron Saint!

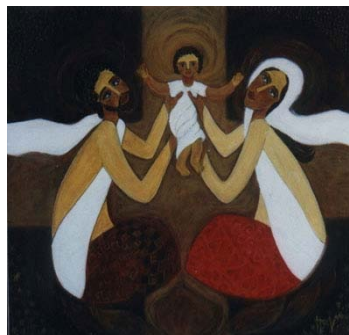
May we all, try to be more like this young man, who despite his circumstance, when looked on, was seen by those who despised him, to have had "*the face of an angel*" (Acts 6:15). Through COVID-19, through all the economic, financial, social, emotional, physical, and psychological damage that the virus has wrought, could our faces not too reflect those "*of an angel*"? That is what the hurting world needs most right now: Messengers and bearers of God's love and light! Doing His work diligently, helping others, sacrificing, when and where possible, albeit in a "*frosty*" and "*cruel*" world. For who knows, maybe it is well that: *Tempus adest floridum*" ("*The time for flowering is near*")? But until then, may we all hold on... May we be brave, as we seek our way through the dark, austere, and harsh "*winter*" landscape that we are presently experiencing. And as we do, may we instil hope and give assistance to those who we encounter along the way, all the while pointing them, just like St. Stephen the Martyr, to "*the Son of man [who is] standing on the right hand of God.*" (Acts 7:56).

May God empower each of us to that end! As we pray:

"GRANT, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed..." [From: The Collect for St. Stephen the Martyr.]

And these things I pray,

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.



*Archbishop Michael and Dalene, Bishop Wellington and Benita, Bishop Andrew Mukuyamba (Zambia), Archbishop Jacob Welbourne (Ghana) and all the Priests and Deacons of the Traditional Anglican Church in Africa, wish you a holy and blessed Christmas, and a safe and prosperous New Year!
God bless you for your faithfulness!*