



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of St Stephen's
Celebrated Sunday Dec. 29, 2013

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The passage sited for our meditation this morning is taken from the Epistle:

“And they stoned Stephen (as he was) calling upon God, and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And as they stoned him, he said, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said that, he fell asleep”
Acts 7:59

Today we celebrate the Feast of St Stephen, the first Deacon and Martyr. In fact, the actual date of celebration is December 26, the day after Christmas. St Stephen's is immediately followed by the Feast of the Holy Innocents, during which we remember the thousands of children slaughtered by Herod, as he tried to find and murder the “new born king” after his first efforts at tricking the Magi into revealing the Christ failed. It may seem ironic or misplaced to juxtapose these two awful events with the Blessed and sweet story of the Christ child's arrival, and yet the church intentionally orders its calendar so that we have to contemplate the Incarnation in the context of these tragedies.

In fact, even our subconscious demands the juxtaposition. Our culture, which celebrates death and selfishness relentlessly, continues every Christmas to release epic films that are no more than a dim reflection of the stories of St. Stephen and the glorious martyrs. Why else would we be treated to the stories like the one where two insignificant little people overcome the whole force of evil, and the allure of its seductive promises, by being true to their faith and love for each other by tossing the One Ring into Mordor's fire. They even overcome their own corrupted nature along, with the Evil One, as our little hobbits overcome not only

Mount Doom, but obsessed and selfish little Gollum. Even more directly, we might struggle to fill our pews, but hundreds of millions of viewers paid to sit and watch Luke Skywalker defy his own nature and the exhortations of the ultimately powered Evil One, by refusing to take vengeance on his relentlessly brutal Father, forgiving him and attempting to redeem Darth Vader. While we may struggle to recognize the epic heroism of St Stephen, we yearn for it, creating pale images to entertain and inspire us. These quests into the realms of fantasy and future are desperate attempts to capture the truth and the redemptive power that sits so close at hand in the Book of Acts.

Our forgiveness is made effectual only by the offering that Jesus made upon the Cross. By his sacrifice, death is made a door to our transcendence rather than our destiny. However, in leaving us the free will to embrace our deliverance, God allows the Devil and his minion death, the power to threaten and corrupt this world and impose its death upon us. I should say the world imposes the fear of the means of death against us, in an effort to frighten us into despair, into relinquishing the redemption that was won for us in Christ.

I often preach about the beautiful and inspirational deaths I have had the privilege to witness. Those are the passings that leave us confident in the truth of the heaven that awaits us. But, there are also difficult deaths. Deaths whose means, the way they happen, seem meaningless or even cruel. There is the passing of innocent children, the withering by illness of those we believe are good, even the outright murder of the Saints, historically and continually. The appearance of injustice that epitomizes these deaths is one of the

most powerful weapons that Satan can deploy against us. We can be so enraged and terrorized by the means of death, that we lose sight of the reality of death.

The appearance of the means of death is not the reality of death. In fact, God's will for us cannot be confounded by the devil, his minions or his artifices. The more awful the persecution of the Church, the more horrendous the fate of the saints, the more powerfully God's love shines through.

Herod tried to prevent Jesus from becoming another Moses. He feared this baby in the manger and the hay would be as powerful as the baby in the ark and bulrushes. He feared that Jesus would lead his people to the promised land the way Joseph led the Jews across the desert. In fact, despite the atrocities he committed, he was the one that causes the prophecy of the Savior coming from Egypt to be true, because it was Herod who drove Joseph there to hide. The murder of the Innocents proved how fearful Herod was, but it did not save him. It did not prevent Jesus from traversing the desert that exists between heaven and earth to lead his people to freedom from death and the fulfillment of His promise of Love. In fact, those Innocents for which Herod was the instrument of the appearance of death actually precede and lead us into the Promised Land. There they will celebrate Victory over sin and death with us. Their lives were not given in vain, the only vanity was Herod's vain hope that he could confound God's will.

The Jews that condemned and stoned St Stephen became as much an instrument of the power of God's love as they had hoped they would be as the instrument of erasing it. When they were convicted by the angelic face of St Stephen, when they accused him falsely to cover his representation of their own guilt, when they stoned him to shut up his Godly admonition and call to repentance, they believed they could confound the will of God. Like St Paul in his persecutor's days, they hoped they could frighten the Church and disperse the movement. They believed that the proper response to the gentle message of love and redemption was imprisonment, torture and murder. Not only did they reveal their own true character, but they revealed the truth through St Stephen.

Honestly, the real fear that we should have is that we can't overcome the self serving brutality of our nature in Adam. That Baptism does not transform us into children of God, or that no amount of grace could allow us to really imitate Christ. But as St Stephen

reiterates the words of forgiveness that Our Lord offered His own persecutors, we are privileged to have witness to the power of grace. That by the sacrifice that Jesus made, we have His life in us and that we do live in Him. We can even overcome that brutal yearning for revenge that characterizes a graceless humanity, and do the unimaginable, the unthinkable, we can actually forgive those that hurt us, because we have been forgiven our own offenses against our Father.

Even Satan himself, when he failed at tempting Jesus in the desert, when he failed to cower Him with the visions of his imminent death in Gethsemane, when he failed to bait Jesus into the justifiable and Godly rage that could have delivered him from the Cross, could not impose the appearance of death over the reality of the dominion Jesus has over it and the devil. The devil delivered Jesus to the door of death, as he had delivered Adam before Him, and Jesus denied that destiny, kicked the door down, preached the good News to the souls that had been in waiting and opened the doors to the gate of heaven, reconciling the Creator with his creation, bringing us home to the unfailing love of the Father.

The juxtaposition of Christmas and the celebration of the lives of St Stephen and the Innocents wasn't accidental or odd. It was done purposefully and powerfully. The purpose of the Incarnation, the willingness of God to allow His only Son to take on our meaningless and lost lives was so that we could join St Stephen in exposing the lie that is the appearance and the means of death. He lives to die so that we don't have to die ourselves. He comes with forgiveness to teach us there will be no point to vengeance in heaven, to give us the hope that we can persevere in our imitation of Jesus until the life that is in Him, truly becomes that Life that is in us, a life that grows and transforms us until our very lives are made eternal and ecstatic in the unfailingly love of the Father through not only His death, but through His life that defeats death once and forever.

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