

They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Acts 6.5

What day is it today? (I'm not asking that because of the usual one day a week, I'm confused by having to work three successive days in a week!) Of course it's Sunday today. But what else is this day? Most of us would say Boxing Day. But if you lived in the Republic of Ireland, the majority of people would say that it is St Stephen's Day, or St Stephenses' Day, as they curiously call it.

So why is the day after Christmas Day given over to commemorating St Stephen, especially since he was the first Christian to be killed for his faith. It seems a bit killjoy to talk about martyrdom in the festive season, doesn't it? But then we have sentimentalised Christmas. We have forgotten about King Herod and his attempt to kill the Baby Jesus by exterminating all the baby boys under two years of age. Jesus was rejected from the very beginning. 'He came unto his own, and how own received him not'. From the very beginning Jesus was a divisive figure, because he threatened people.

So why Stephen on Boxing Day? Our Bible reading from Acts 6 reminded us that the early church needed dedicated people to help with the practical outreach to the needy among them, v1... The Twelve were overstretched. It would have been so easy for them to cut down on their Bible Study and prayer time to see to the widows and orphans, but they refused to go down that road. Instead they appointed seven deacons to see to the needy, vv2-4... What a warning that is to us ministers who say we are too busy to read our Bibles or to say our prayers! Anyway, they appointed seven deacons, among whom was our

friend Stephen. Their job was to give gifts of food and clothing to the poor and needy among them. And possibly *that* is why we celebrate St Stephen on Boxing Day, because the day *after* Christmas Day was the day when the Christmas boxes would have been given to the servants and workers. They would have been *working* on Christmas Day to provide the sumptuous meal for their masters. Boxing Day was the *servants'* day.

So St Stephen, the first *deacon*, reminds us of the caring, giving role of the servant church. But it was as the first Christian martyr that he was immortalised. Arrested on trumped-up charges, he was stoned to death. Though his defence speech, the 2<sup>nd</sup> longest in the NT, is eloquent, his prayer for God to forgive his killers was his most powerful witness to Christ, 7.59... The word 'martyr' is Greek for 'witness'.

When we think of Christian martyrs, we probably think of Romans throwing Christians to the lions. The sad reality is that more Christians have been martyred in the 20thC than in all the previous nineteen centuries put together, and it is getting worse. If you follow the efforts, say, of the Barnabas Fund, you will read horrific accounts of how Christians are harassed, discriminated against, persecuted, and sometimes even killed in other countries of other faiths. Christians abroad dread Christmas, because this is when mobs are whipped up against them in Iraq (where ironically there is now no Saddam to protect them from Islamic extremists), in Pakistan and Indonesia. In Pakistan at the moment a Christian mother-of-five, Aasia Bibi has been condemned to death for allegedly dishonouring the name of Mohammed. When I see the surrendered

lives of former Muslims who have come to Christ and face the death penalty for so-called apostasy, it makes my blood boil to hear western liberals say that all religions are merely different roads up to the same mountain top. If that were true, why do people like Aasia Bibi risk their lives to come to Christ? Why didn't St Stephen just stay a Jew and spare himself the trouble. Why did Jesus bother himself to die for us, if any old religion will do?

The truth is that people desperately need Jesus, but they don't *want* him. Our people are looking for something deep to make sense of their lives. They don't want to feel that they are just a number; that they are just 'dust in the wind'. They need hope. They need to know that there is a reason to get out of bed in the morning. People *know* that consumerism does fill the emptiness. They need a light above them to lead them up and out of themselves, and they need a solid foundation beneath them. Only Christ can give all that.

But what are we doing to point people to the Lord Jesus? Are we witnessing to him like St Stephen, like Aasia Bibi? I'm afraid that by and large we are not. Oh yes, we come to church on a Sunday, and in our little way we practise what we preach, but we keep it all to ourselves, don't we, because we don't want to 'offend' anyone. We swallowed hook line and sinker the enlightenment line since the 18thC that religion is 'private'. Pardon me for saying it, but your Christianity is a bit like sex. You can do it, but don't talk about it! It's rude.

In the past hundred years the Church in the west has suffered a catastrophic loss of nerve. Of course, no-one wants

to ram it down people's throats, but that doesn't mean that Christianity must remain shut up in little churches for an hour on a Sunday. Why have we allowed ourselves to be brow-beaten by Voltaire and all the atheists? Why are the Abps and the bps frightened to call the nation to repentance? Because they are more bothered about being popular and being liked!

Last week I was walking down Piccadilly and I saw this Mission Statement on the notice board of St James's Church:

*We understand ourselves to be called to gather as body which welcomes and celebrates human diversity, including spirituality, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation; to create a space where people of any faith or none can question and discover the sacred in life through openness, struggle, laughter and prayer; to a common commitment to be in solidarity with the poor and marginalised people and to cherish the earth.*

And just to end it says sweetly, 'We don't manage it all the time so we try again'. Ah, bless! The rector will be a bishop.

Where is God in that? Where is Jesus? And they wonder why the churches are declining. It's so sad. They have been defeated by the well meaning, the tolerant and by Political Correctness. When some people wanted to entertain shoppers in Meadowhall Shopping Centre in Sheffield by singing the Hallelujah chorus, the PC managers refused, because it *might* offend some - in a country where 73% claim to be Christians!

The Pope was surprised at the warmth of his welcome in Britain earlier this year. People recognised his integrity. After his visit crucifixes began to appear with the two words 'Not Ashamed' written on them. Let's stop the cringing to atheists and stand up for Jesus. We don't have to justify our existence. Let's be a witness like St Stephen, because our people need Jesus, and there's no-one to tell them but you.

