

Saint Stephen's Day 2021

And Stephen said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the son of man standing on the right hand of God."

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.**

What a privilege we enjoy this day to be able to celebrate the Feast of our patron, Saint Stephen, on a Sunday. It's placement on the Kalendar means that it is often not given due prominence, like other feasts that occur on a weekday or at a more popular time of year such as Christmas. But Stephen is our patron and our parish proudly bears his name and enjoys his protection and intercession.

The name "Stephen" comes from the Greek word "stephanos" which means, "crown." Jesus says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." St. Stephen was indeed faithful unto death-he is the first martyr, the first human being to choose to die rather than deny Jesus.

It is rather remarkable that the Church Kalendar catapults us from the sublime joy of Christmas into the contemplation the very next day of a man having his head smashed with rocks. But there are intimations of violent death even in the cozy manger scene itself.

The swaddling clothes in which the Blessed Virgin wraps her baby son prefigure the shroud of his burial. And in a little over a week, we'll celebrate the arrival of the Wise Men that present Jesus with three gifts, one of which is myrrh-a spice used to anoint corpses.

We meet Saint Stephen in the first chapter of the Book of Acts, a book written by Saint Luke. We don't know for certain if Stephen followed Jesus during his earthly ministry. But Acts tells us that a squabble had developed in the young Church at Jerusalem over the distribution of money to help support widows. The Apostles-the first bishops, decided that they should not take time away from their many duties to solve what appeared to be an administrative problem. Thus, a second order of ministers is created to handle the matter. Those ministers are called deacons: helpers, or waiters.

The Apostles set the standards. The candidates would be honest men, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom. Out of the seven men selected, the first was Stephen, described as a man "full of faith and of the Holy Ghost." We're told that the Apostles laid their hands upon these men and prayed over them. Thus, the Second Order of the Church's ministry is formed.

While this story gives me the chance, let me remind you of one aspect of our identity as Anglicans, more specifically Anglican Catholics. We follow the three-fold ministries of Bishop, priests, and deacons. The Bishops are the successors of the Apostles, the order of deacons begins with St. Stephen and his cohorts, and the middle order, the priesthood or presbyterate, develops in the late first and early second centuries as a function delegated by the bishop.

The three-fold ministry is Biblical, and it is what was followed by all Christians in the first 15 centuries of the Church's existence and continues to be the practice of the vast majority of Christendom. This three-fold catholic order is not something cooked up by some pope in the Dark Ages. It comes to us directly from Jesus himself.

As we learn from the Book of Acts, splitting up ministerial responsibility proved to be a good idea. The Word of God increased, Church membership grew, and a large number of priests of the Jewish temple became Christians. St Luke also reports, "Stephen full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people."

But certain of the Jews argued with Stephen's teaching, and when they could not beat him in debate, they paid people to lie. These folks

labeled Stephen a blasphemer who claimed that Jesus was going to come down out of the sky to destroy the temple and change everything that had been established by Moses.

It is clear that Luke wants to make St. Stephen seem as much like Jesus as possible. He is full of faith and miraculous power. The Jews debate him but when he frustrates them with amazing debate skills, they conspire to have him killed.

Luke tells us that as Stephen gave his testimony, the onlookers “saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.” Stephen did not try to ingratiate himself with his judges. Instead, he did a quick overview of the history of God’s chosen people.

What he says sounds much like what Jesus says in today’s Gospel. That every time God sends his people a man with a message, they kill him. Stephen concludes his speech with these damning words, “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost-as your fathers did, so do ye.”

It was bad enough that you killed the Prophets, but now you have even gone beyond that-you have betrayed and murdered God’s only Son. We’re told when they heard these things they were “cut to the heart and gnashed upon him with their teeth.”

Stephen looked up into the sky and told them he was looking at Jesus who was standing next to God. As a result, the people stopped up their ears, threw him outside of the city, and stoned him.

As all of this was taking place, “Stephen called upon God saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, ‘Lord lay not this sin to their charge.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Sound familiar? Well, Saint Stephen died just as Jesus died- commending himself to God and forgiving his executioners.

The martyrdom of Saint Stephen proved at least two things-Jesus’ power remained in the Church even though He had returned to heaven- AND, people were willing to die rather than deny him.

May each of us endeavor to follow his example in our pursuit of Christ.

“Like him with pardon on his tongue/ in midst of mortal pain/ He prayed for them that did the wrong/ who follows in his train?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.