

**CAN'T WE FAST-FORWARD TO NEW YEAR'S EVE?
St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr, December 26th, 2010
Acts 6,7; Matthew 23:34-37**

In the secular world, Christmas is the season that abruptly ends on December 25th. In the church, Christmas *starts* on the 25th and runs all the way through Epiphany on January 6th - the traditional Twelve Days of Christmas. Now by New Year's Eve, most of us have reached the Christmas carol saturation point, having been assaulted by TV "seasonal specials" and saccharine Muzak renditions of the Little Drummer Boy in malls, supermarkets and radios for at least 5 weeks. Still, we Christians maintain a fragment of that 12-day Christmas spirit, and we like to linger a little while past the 25th on the stories, songs and wonder of the season.

So it's a rude awakening to come to church on the day after Christmas, the day of true love's turtledoves, and find out it's the feast day of St. Stephen, deacon and martyr. No more babies lying in swaddling bands, asleep on the hay. No more angels, singing of peace and goodwill. No more shepherds or Mary or Joseph, adoring on bended knee. Nope! Instead we're treated to a story of confrontation, rejection and murder of a good and innocent man. If that weren't enough, the Old Testament lesson is even more violent, ending with Zechariah's prayer for vengeance upon those who were killing him. And when we fi-

nally get to hear Jesus speak - after weeks of Gospel stories that merely pointed to him - we hear a portion of his terrible litany of "woes" spoken to the leaders of his own people. From Abel to Zechariah, literally from A to Z, the history of rejection and persecution of God's prophets is laid out in terrible clarity. The passage ends with Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and its people who seem so bent on self-destruction. *This is what we get on the very day after Christmas?*

The whole week between Christmas and New Year's is riddled with theological land mines. Today it's the stoning of Stephen. Tomorrow it's the feast of St. John the Evangelist, who at least managed to not get stoned or stabbed to death, but who wrote some of the most beautiful but difficult words we're liable to digest in this lifetime. The day after that, it's back to mayhem and bloodshed as we commemorate the Holy Innocents, the little children of Bethlehem ruthlessly slaughtered by a paranoid King Herod. That's certainly my candidate for least favorite festival in the church year. Talk about Scrooge! Talk about the Grinch who stole Christmas! Couldn't we just fast-forward to New Year's Eve and its festivities and avoid these hard, violent, and thoroughly unpleasant readings?

We could, but obviously we're not going to! And no, I'm not a sadist bent on dampening your holiday festivities. But the story of Stephen is a valuable one to hear in the midst of Christmas carols, gift-

giving and associated holiday cheer. For one thing, it reminds us that our world is not often like the one depicted on Hallmark greeting cards. The story of Jesus' birth is not a cute little fairy tale, set once upon a time in a galaxy - er, town - far, far away. In the wonderful words of Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, "This little babe, so few days old, was sent to rifle Satan's fold." Jesus was born into a deadly world, and the peace he brings is an alien intrusion into the prejudice, hard heartedness, greed, and violence that has bedeviled us since Cain slew his brother Abel.

God sent his son amongst us wide-eyed, so to speak. He knew what he was in for; it's what too many of his people have been in for. You know how incredibly hard the holidays are for many people - perhaps even for yourselves. Sickness, auto accidents, divorce and death don't take off for Christmas. How many times do those Christmas words about joy, peace, and comfort ring incredibly hollow for us when our hearts have been torn in two because of sin, the devil, and death? How many times do the brutality of war, the tragedy of natural disaster, the crushing burden of abuse, or the anguish of injustice seem doubly awful because they seem to make a mockery of the birth of the Prince of Peace? How many times? *God knows; God knows.*

However wonderfully amazing the story of Jesus' birth, however comforting the songs about love, joy, comfort and peace, we can never

lose sight of *why* this child was born, or what he was sent to do. *He was sent to rifle Satan's fold. He was sent to spring the trap of death and hell. He was sent to confront and confound the powers of wickedness and hatefulness and destruction and rebellion. He was sent to save God's people from their sin.*

In short, he was sent to wade into the very world that we live in and suffer in and die in.

And that can be powerfully good news for those who groan and mourn beneath loads of sorrow, grief, despair and death. Maybe St. Stephen's day can shed a stronger and truer beam of light and hope of deliverance for such people than can the sweet gentle glow of Christmas Eve candles. For like Stephen, they may look to Jesus their Lord when all is *not* calm or bright, peaceful or joyous, and may still be given strength and courage and assurance of his strong saving presence and of his love that triumphs over evil and death itself. Like Stephen, they can look to their crucified and risen Lord, ruling in kingly love, and draw from him the power to bless instead of curse, forgive instead of hate, and hope instead of despair.

There's another reason for celebrating this uncomfortable festival. It's a wake-up call that gives us a hint about the cost of accepting the gift of Jesus into our lives and our world. It's amazing at the dif-

ference in attendance experienced by most churches when you compare Christmas Eve to the first Sunday after Christmas. The same thing happens when you look at the number of worshippers on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, or Easter and the first Sunday afterwards.

Everybody likes to sing Christmas carols to an innocent baby; everybody enjoys putting themselves in Bethlehem with a humble gift to delight a poor child and his parents. Everybody can imagine following the star to the stable. But the innocent baby grows up; the poor child matures into the Son of God who bids us to take up our cross and follow him in paths of obedient and self-giving love. Following him in such paths might just lead to suffering, persecution, rejection and even death. We think to come and worship a baby in the peacefulness of a winter's night, surrounded by friendly animals and glorious angels. And we discover that we stand in the presence of One whose cross-bound love is so amazing, so divine, that in response it demands our soul, our life, our all.

And as Stephen discovered, responding to that love can upend our lives forever. It drove him to speak hard truths in love to those of his people who had refused to respond to God's graciousness. It caused him to cling to his Savior even when the people he loved rejected his words. Responding to Jesus' love empowered Stephen to pray, even as his Lord had prayed, that God's forgiveness should rest upon his ene-

mies. Unlike Zechariah, who prayed the easier prayer for vengeance, Stephen took the harder, narrower way of forgiveness.

We speak easily of accepting the marvelous gift of God's love, first made known to us in a little child in humble surroundings. But Stephen reminds us that accepting *this* gift is a risky and life-changing proposition. There are gifts with warranties that read something like, "Signing this warranty implies acceptance of all conditions stipulated herein." Maybe the baby Jesus in our Christmas crèches should wear swaddling clothes printed with some similar statement.

Because God makes some things very clear. Anyone can come and worship, just as they are. But they cannot expect or demand that God will let them *remain* just as they are, unchanged by their encounter with his Son. Any of us can come with the simplicity of our humble gifts. But we cannot expect or demand that God will *not* transform and use us, and our gifts, to his glory and in the service of his people.

Anyone's heart can be a cradle for the newborn King of Kings. But we cannot expect or demand that our hearts will *not* be stretched, reshaped, and even broken, as this crucified and risen King reigns from those earthly thrones. We cannot expect or demand that his holiness and purity should *not* make us holy and pure, even if draws snickers or rolled eyes from friends. We cannot expect or demand that his self-

giving love should *not* be made known through our own lives, even if it is sometimes inconvenient or difficult. We cannot expect or demand that the forgiveness and compassion he bestows upon us should *not* shape our attitudes, thoughts, words and deeds, even though such forgiveness is costly and such compassion goes against the grain at times.

And there's one more thing that God makes very clear in the lives of his faithful servants like Stephen. Anyone can receive the gift of faith and salvation, forgiveness and eternal life that lies within the heart of Christ, God's great and final gift to us all. And they should not be the least surprised that he will strengthen them in true faith, in compassion and forgiveness, in bold speech and self-giving love. Even in the face of hardship, sorrow, disaster or death, they should not be surprised. For this gift - this little child, crucified Savior, this risen and ascended Lord - makes good on his every promise. He is truly the gift that keeps on giving, until he gives us heaven itself forever. Amen.