

St. Stephen
Sunday, December 26, 2010
10 o'clock

Acts 6:8-7:2,51-60

8 Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. 10But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. 11Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' 12They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. 13They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; 14for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' 15And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these things so?' 2And Stephen replied:

'Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,

51 'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. 52Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. 53You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.'

54 When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 55But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' 57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' 60Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

8Στέφανος δὲ πλήρης χάριτος καὶ δυνάμεως ἐποίει τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα μεγάλα ἐν τῷ λαῷ. 9ἀνέστησαν δὲ τινες τῶν ἐκ τῆς συναγωγῆς τῆς λεγομένης Λιβερτίνων καὶ Κυρηναίων καὶ Ἀλεξανδρέων καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ Κιλικίας καὶ Ἀσίας συζητοῦντες τῷ Στεφάνῳ, 10καὶ οὐκ ἴσχυον ἀντιστῆναι τῇ σοφίᾳ καὶ τῷ πνεύματι ᾧ ἐλάλει. 11τότε ὑπέβαλον ἄνδρας λέγοντας ὅτι Ἀκηκόαμεν αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος ῥήματα βλάσφημα εἰς Μωϋσῆν καὶ τὸν θεόν: 12συνεκίνησάν τε τὸν λαὸν καὶ τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους καὶ τοὺς γραμματεῖς, καὶ ἐπιστάντες συνήρπασαν αὐτὸν καὶ ἤγαγον εἰς τὸ συνέδριον, 13ἔστησάν τε μάρτυρας ψευδεῖς λέγοντας, Ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος οὐ παύεται λαλῶν ῥήματα κατὰ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἁγίου [τούτου] καὶ τοῦ νόμου: 14ἀκηκόαμεν γὰρ αὐτοῦ λέγοντος ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος οὗτος καταλύσει τὸν τόπον τοῦτον καὶ ἀλλάξει τὰ ἔθνη ἃ παρέδωκεν ἡμῖν Μωϋσῆς. 15καὶ

ἀτενίσαντες εἰς αὐτὸν πάντες οἱ καθεζόμενοι ἐν τῷ συνεδρίῳ εἶδον τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡσεὶ πρόσωπον ἀγγέλου.

2ὸ δὲ ἔφη, Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοὶ καὶ πατέρες, ἀκούσατε. Ὁ θεὸς τῆς δόξης ὤφθη τῷ πατρὶ ἡμῶν Ἀβραὰμ ὅντι ἐν τῇ Μεσοποταμίᾳ πρὶν ἢ κατοικῆσαι αὐτὸν ἐν Χαρράν,

51 Σκληροτράχηλοι καὶ ἀπερίμητοι καρδίαις καὶ τοῖς ὠσίν, ὑμεῖς αἰεὶ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ ἀντιπίπτετε, ὡς οἱ πατέρες ὑμῶν καὶ ὑμεῖς. 52 τίνα τῶν προφητῶν οὐκ ἐδίωξαν οἱ πατέρες ὑμῶν; καὶ ἀπέκτειναν τοὺς προκαταγγείλαντας περὶ τῆς ἐλεύσεως τοῦ δικαίου οὐ νῦν ὑμεῖς προδόται καὶ φονεῖς ἐγένεσθε, 53 οἵτινες ἐλάβετε τὸν νόμον εἰς διαταγὰς ἀγγέλων, καὶ οὐκ ἐφυλάξατε. 54 Ἀκούοντες δὲ ταῦτα διεπρίοντο ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν καὶ ἔβρυχον τοὺς ὀδόντας ἐπ' αὐτόν. 55 ὑπάρχων δὲ πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου ἀτενίσας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἶδεν δόξαν θεοῦ καὶ Ἰησοῦν ἐστῶτα ἐκ δεξιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ, 56 καὶ εἶπεν, Ἴδου θεωρῶ τοὺς οὐρανοὺς διηνοιγμένους καὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ δεξιῶν ἐστῶτα τοῦ θεοῦ. 57 κράξαντες δὲ φωνῇ μεγάλῃ συνέσχον τὰ ὦτα αὐτῶν, καὶ ὥρμησαν ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἐπ' αὐτόν, 58 καὶ ἐβαλόντες ἔξω τῆς πόλεως ἐλιθοβόλουν. καὶ οἱ μάρτυρες ἀπέθεντο τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν παρὰ τοὺς πόδας νεανίου καλουμένου Σαύλου. 59 καὶ ἐλιθοβόλουν τὸν Στέφανον ἐπικαλούμενον καὶ λέγοντα, Κύριε Ἰησοῦ, δέξαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου. 60 θεὸς δὲ τὰ γόνατα ἔκραξεν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, Κύριε, μὴ στήσης αὐτοῖς ταύτην τὴν ἁμαρτίαν. καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἐκοιμήθη.

Wenceslas

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*



*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
Though the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight
Gath'ring winter fuel.*



The Good King Wenceslaus of the familiar and popular Christmas Carol of the same name is Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia (907–935). He was assassinated by his brother and his brother's supporters ... on the way to church. He is the Patron Saint of the Czech Republic.

The Carol is unique, because as far as Christmas Carols go, there is no reference to the Nativity of Our Lord in any of the verses. And the music is not based upon any ancient Christmas or Wintertime hymn, but on a 13th Century Springtime Carol *Tempus adest*

*floridum*¹ from a Finnish collection of Late Medieval songs published in 1582 which includes 74 Swedish/Latin songs that were sung in Finnish Cathedral schools.

John Mason Neale (1818-1866) a priest of the Church of England, a scholar and a hymn-writer ... is responsible for the lyrics which he matched to the medieval song.

We know Neale from his contribution to the Christmas Hymn selection, most notably *Good Christian Men, Rejoice* and his translation of the Advent hymn *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. But his scholarly work also bring us translations into English of many Latin, Greek, Russian, and Syrian hymns, most notably:

- * All Glory, Laud, and Honour
- * Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle
- * To Thee Before the Close of Day
- * O come, O come, Emmanuel
- * Of the Father's Heart Begotten

But, in the Christmas Season, his *Good King Wenceslas* has taken on the magnitude of greatness ... just listen to the Mannheim Steamroller version of it from their 1984 *Fresh Aire Christmas* which appears over and over and over again on any FM Radio Station devoted to Christmas Music in the weeks before the actual celebration of the Nativity.

Wenceslas, wrote Neale, looked out on the day after Christmas, saw a poor man gathering wood in a snowstorm and was so moved that he assembled surplus food and wine and carried them through the blizzard to the peasant's door. During the journey, the king's page is about to give up the struggle against the cold weather, but is enabled to continue by the heat miraculously emanating from the king's footprints in the snow.

The whole point and meaning of the carol is found in the final verse:

¹ Words: Unknown author, 13th Century; first appeared in the Finnish *Piae Cantiones*, 1582.

Tempus adest floridum, surgent namque flores
Vernales in omnibus, imitantur mores
Hoc quod frigus laeserat, reparant calores
Cernimus hoc fieri, per multos labores.

Sunt prata plena floribus, iucunda aspectu
Ubi iuvat cernere, herbas cum delectu
Gramina et plantae hyeme quiescunt
Vernali in tempore virent et accrescunt.

Haec vobis pulchre monstrant Deum creatorem
Quem quoque nos credimus omnium factorem
O tempus ergo hilare, quo laetari libet
Renovato nam mundo, nos novari decet.

Terra ornatur floribus et multo decore
Nos honestis moribus et vero amore
Gaudeamus igitur tempore iucundo
Laudemusque Dominum pectoris ex fundo.

*In his master's steps he trod
 Where the snow lay dinted
 Heat was in the very sod
 Which the Saint had printed
 Therefore, Christian men, be sure
 Wealth or rank possessing
 Ye who now will bless the poor
 Shall yourselves find blessing.²*

Neale composed the hymn devoted to the custom of *Boxing Day* in England, which has nothing to do with pugilism, but with the Alms Boxes which were placed in every Church on Christmas Day, into which congregants placed a gift for the poor of the parish. These boxes were always opened on the day after Christmas, and the contents distributed.

Neale wanted people to remember the poor just as in the legend of Wenceslas ... in fact, it was a *regal* act of Charity.



Now why on the Feast of St. Stephen? Well, remember the story which you heard this morning in the Second Reading, that long account from the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume written by the same author as the Gospel According to Luke.

In the Acts, Luke recounts the story of what happened after the death and resurrection of Jesus ... that is, the stories of faith about how the early followers of Jesus did indeed follow him.

After the story of the disciples reassembling in Jerusalem, after the account of the Day of Pentecost, after the lengthy “sermon” by Peter, after the miraculous healing of the man who was lame at Solomon’s Portico by Peter and another “sermon”, after their arrest and imprisonment, after the rather unusual story of Ananias and Sapphira who were keeping back some of their “offerings”, after another imprisonment of Peter and John – and their miraculous escape so that they could continue preaching and teaching, after all of that ... in the 6th chapter of this volume

comes the story of the First Martyr Stephen ... who is, if we remember to read the beginning verses of that chapter, the first in the lists of *deacons* or servants of the church.



It is from this story that the early church continued to have not just presbyters (priests) and eventually *episcopoi* (shepherds or bishops) but those designated with the specific task of being church-servants, that is to take the ministry of the church – it’s healing, it’s almsgiving, it’s advocacy – into the community.

Stephen’s crime, for which he pays with his own life, is that he challenges the religious authorities for not doing what the law of God expects them to do ... what we call in Hebrew *tikun olam* ... “healing of the world” ... or we might say, works of compassion and love which bring about peace and justice, the end to oppression and violence,

² Bold print emphasis, mine.

and a conclusion to intolerance and non-inclusiveness.

The celebration of December 26th as his Saint Day can be traced to the 4th Century; and, in the Middle Ages, Stephen was one of the most popular Saints.

In the Orthodox Church, his Feast Day is December 27th.

As we sing John Mason Neale's hymn this morning, let us remember not only the legend of Wenceslas, and the story of Stephen ... but let us call to mind the whole meaning of this Christmas Season which is not *one day* but 12 (as in the *Twelve Days of Christmas*) ... during which time we who follow Jesus, are called upon to use our time and our talents ... and our treasures ... for the good of others, the welfare of neighbor and stranger, the welcoming of those who come to us seeking comfort and hope.

And with Good King Wenceslas, when we "look out[side] on the Feast of Stephen, let us keep our eyes open to those who come into our vision, and keep our hearts open to their needs, their humanity.

Let us pray.

We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of Stephen and the legend of Wenceslas ... that we may follow in their footsteps in this Holy Season, and bring your love, the love of the Church into the world. Amen.

Deo Gratias (+)
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