

ACTS 7.54-60: STEPHEN AND GOOD KING WENCESLAS

Officially today is not Boxing Day – that is Monday

Today is St Stephen's Day – and so it is appropriate that at this stage we focus on Stephen.

Stephen first comes to our notice in the Bible as *a man who cared for the poor*.

Along with six other men he was responsible for caring for poor widows in Jerusalem.

Today he is best-known as *the first Christian martyr*.

Our English word 'martyr' comes from a Greek word 'martus' which means 'witness'.

What is a witness? A witness is someone who gives evidence, often in a court of law as to the truth of what they have seen or heard.

Stephen stood before a Jewish court and gave evidence in favour of Jesus.

He talked about the difference the death of Jesus had made to the world – and as a result he was sentenced to death by stoning.

Death by stoning is a pretty nasty sort of death.

Give me the electric chair or the guillotine any day!

Apparently the witnesses for the prosecution played a key role: for not only did they accuse the criminal of his crime, they also threw the first stone.

I'm told that they often threw the criminal from a height – hoping perhaps to kill him in that way – and they then pelted him with stones.

Yes, it was because of their physical involvement that Saul had to hold the coats of those who were doing the stoning .

Stephen died a very nasty death.

And yet *it was also a very wonderful death*.

For as the stones rained upon him, instead of shouting our curses upon them and calling upon God to punish them, he cried out "**Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!**" (7.59) I.e. Lord forgive them.

Of whom does this remind you? Surely, Jesus! As he hung upon the Cross, Jesus cried out: "**Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing**" (Luke 23.34)

Similarly Stephen forgave those who put him to death.

In this terrible unjust situation, Stephen showed no bitterness – rather he died in a truly Christ-like way.

In his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul wrote: "**Do not repay evil with evil – but overcome evil with good**" (Rom 12.17,21 NRSV). Stephen did precisely that.

Instead of returning evil with evil, he conquered evil with good. And because he did so, God was able to cause something positive to emerge from this tragedy.

Almost certainly it was the death of Stephen became the catalyst for the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Paul could not get out of his mind the way that Stephen had died forgiving those who caused his death.

It was Stephen's capacity to love which caused Paul to re-think his opposition to Jesus.

Augustine: "*The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen*".

If this is so, then here we have an illustration of the truth of the words of Paul in Rom 8.28: “**We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him**”.

Yes, even out of a very unjust and unfair event, God was able to bring good.

Down through the years there have been *many Stephens* – Christians who have died for their faith. And in dying they have caused their persecutors to re-think their opposition.

Indeed, it has been said that *‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’*.

The more people have supported to suppress the Christian faith, the more the faith has flourished – not least because of the way that Christians have witnessed to their faith in their dying.

One such Christian martyr was King Wenceslas, the 10th century king of Bohemia.

Bohemia along with Moravia makes up what we call today the Czech Republic.

Wenceslas was born around 907 AD, the first-born son of Prince Vratislav.

Vratislav was killed in a battle when Wenceslas was 13.

At the age of 18 Wenceslas became king of Bohemia.

The Christmas carol calls him ‘Good King Wenceslas’ – and he was a good king.

Thanks to his grandmother Ludmilla he had become a Christian and there are all sorts of stories about his love for the poor. *In many ways he was like Stephen in his care for the poor.*

He also sought to extend the Christian faith by building a number of churches.

However, at that time the Christian faith had yet to become the dominant religion of the lands of Bohemia & Moravia. Many Czechs were opposed to the Christian faith – including Wenceslas’ mother, Drahomira. Drahomira was the daughter of a leading pagan tribal chief and had a great influence her second son Boleslas. He was not a Christian.

Boleslas became jealous of his brother and with a group of fellow nobles plotted to kill Wenceslas with a view to seizing the throne.

Knowing his brother was a keen Christian, in September 935 Boleslas invited Wenceslas to join him for a special service to honour two Czech saints: but when Wenceslas came near to the church, Boleslas together with three friends attacked him and hacked him to death with their swords. Wenceslas died at the church door, aged just 28 years old.

According to one version of the story, as he died, *Wenceslas died with words of mercy and forgiveness on his lips.*

He died like Stephen, a martyr for the Christian faith.

For this and other acts of kindness, Wenceslas became the Czech patron saint.

Today if you go to Prague, the capital of Czech Republic, you can see a huge statue of King Wenceslas on his horse, in the one of the central squares, known as Wenceslas Square.

Wenceslas and Stephen – two men who lived at very different times and in very different circumstances – and yet *two men who cared for the poor and who died for their faith.*

On this Feast of St Stephen both provide a model for Christian living.