
26 Wednesday

FEAST of St STEPHEN, Martyr

Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59
Psalm 30: 3-4, 6, 8, 16-17
Matt. 10: 17-22

Is it odd that on this, the second of the traditional joyful “12 Days of Christmas”, we should make festival for a martyr ? remember a violent death as we celebrate a peaceful birth ? put the heavenly birthday of a young Christian minister immediately after the earthly birthday of the Son of heaven ? Sentimentality and commercialism do obscure the meaning of Christmas ---- the birth of Christ at Bethlehem is really so full of paradox and contradiction. Celebrating St Stephen reminds us of the cross over the crib. Like Jesus, Stephen was not accepted by certain people, then falsely accused, condemned and killed. [The liturgical reading from the Acts of the Apostles only gives the beginning and end of the story of Stephen: it’s worth reading the rest of it, and noting all the similarities]. Stephen was the first Christian martyr, chosen as a deacon to serve the faith community, which he did with his life. Countless others, since then and up to today, have also given that witness. It is a parallel to the angels’ witness on Christmas night: “Glory to God in the highest”. And it’s what Jesus Himself foretold for His followers, as today’s gospel reading from St Matthew reminds us: “You will be hated by all on account of me”. But Jesus also said not to worry about how to respond, for “the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you” ---- that same Spirit who also filled St Stephen.

In times of joy and celebration too, we pray: “Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit”

Text word-count: 266