

## **The Feast of St. Stephen, A✠D 2010**

**Acts 6:8-7:60; Matthew 23:34-39**

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

1 The three days after Christmas always feel a little awkward when they fall on a Sunday. On the Second Day of Christmas the Church Year gives to you the Feast of St. Stephen, Protomartyr. On the Third Day of Christmas, the Church Year gives to you the feast of St. John, as we celebrated last year, who was not martyred, but was exiled to the island of Patmos, away from the congregation he served during the time of its persecution. On the Fourth Day of Christmas, the Church Year gives to you the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the baby and toddler boys in Bethlehem whom Herod had slaughtered in a failed attempt to murder the One born King of the Jews. Christmas is bound to martyrdom in the Church's eyes. You have all three types of martyrs the three days after Christmas: the babies who were martyrs in deed, but not in will; St. John who was willing to be martyred, but was not martyred in deed; and St. Stephen, who was a martyr in both will and deed. Why the awkward juxtaposition of Christmas with the death of Christians?

2 Yesterday you had Baby Jesus in a manger; today you have Lord Jesus looking down from heaven as the first Christian is about to be killed for confessing Jesus to be the Christ. What beautiful incongruity. Baby Jesus cozy and cuddled in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, peacefully nursing at the Blessed Virgin's breast. And then Stephen: seized and brought before the council on false charges, preaching the history of salvation from the Old Testament, calling his persecutors and the religious elites "stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, [who] always resist the Holy Spirit," who betrayed and murdered the Righteous One, Jesus, looking up into heaven, bones crushed and blood splattered by the barrage of stones, praying for forgiveness for his murderers, dying.

3 A martyr is a witness. In fact, the word martyr is the Greek word for "witness." Martyrs, therefore, are those who witness to Christ, even in death. And the Church has always viewed martyrdom as the most blessed death God could grant to His saints. To die as a confession of the faith is considered an honor bestowed by God. To confess Christ not only with lips and words but also with blood and lives is a bold confession. To die a martyr's death is to say, "I belong to Christ, who has died for me. If He did not count His own life as too great a cost to pay for me, He will not abandon me to death, and I do not count my own life too great a cost to spend to confess Him who gave His life for me.

4 St. Stephen finds strength to die such a courageous death from the One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. So may you. That's why the Church gives you martyrdom on the three days after Christmas: so that you might not fear death. No one likes to talk about death. When someone dies, we try to hide that fact in friendlier euphemisms, saying instead that he passed away, passed on, went to a better place, or whatever. To name death is to have to deal with it. To say that someone died is to acknowledge that we too will die.

5 St. Stephen's Day is a bit of a reality check after Christmas revelries. Most Christmas merrymakers are happily not thinking about morbid things like death or martyrdom. The gifts you received or gave can only be enjoyed temporarily. The food, the drinks, the conversation, the jokes are consumed and forgotten. For some people, Christmas is a much closer confrontation with death, as there is one more empty place at the table than there was last year. No matter the festivities, there is always a let-down afterward, always a depressing feeling that all the good times are ended.

6 But the point of St. Stephen's Day is to confess that the joy and celebration need not end. Stephen was not defeated. He was victorious. He is joined with His Lord Jesus, whom he saw before his death. The death of Stephen is not a tragedy. It is a triumph. Stephen retained God's gift of faith until

death. Death did not win over Stephen because Stephen's Lord—and yours—is He who died on the cross to deliver Stephen and all people from death's control. Stephen's Lord—and yours—is He who rose victorious from death, who forever broke death's power. The Baby whose birth we celebrate still is the God-Man who came to give His life on the cross in exchange for yours. If death cannot hold Jesus, neither can it hold those who belong to Him.

7 While you await the Day of Jesus' return, He gathers you in safety in His Church. The Church is not a hospital, a place where people are all recovering and getting better. It's a hospice, a place where people go to learn how to die. The Church's role is to be the means through which God delivers His gift of faith to you, the place where Christ preaches to you, where the Holy Spirit works faith within you and delivers to you the precious gift of forgiveness.

8 Here, in Christ's Church, the feasting does not end. The same Jesus you received yesterday at His altar is the same Jesus you receive today at His altar. That's the message of St. Stephen's Day: there is a celebration that does not end, a party which continues into eternity, revelry that endures. Stephen is gathered with all the company of heaven who await the day of the Lord's return, the company of saints who pray fervently for that Day. Like you, they await that great consummation. For now, you have this foretaste. The same Body and Blood of Jesus which strengthened Stephen and all the saints who have preceded you into that little, restful sleep of death, strengthens you today, body and soul, until life everlasting. However death comes, whether God grants you the blessed death of martyrdom or some other means of death, the Lord's Supper is the means your Lord Jesus uses to preserve you in the faith until His return or until the day of your death. Merry Christmas.

*In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*Soli Deo Gloria*

Pastor Jeff Hemmer