



Example

Thursday 26th December



*Saint Stephen (Limewood with traces of paint) by Hans Leinberger (German, active 1510–1530).
Metropolitan Museum, New York (Bequest of Gula V. Hirschland, 1980)*

Scripture: Acts 6:8-7:2a,51c-60

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then 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. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They 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. They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for 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." And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then the high priest asked him, "Are these things so?"

And Stephen replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me. You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which 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. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then 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. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then 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.

To reflect

Today is St Stephen's Day, a day when the church remembers the first martyr of the Christian faith. The word martyr comes from the Greek word that means to bear witness. The day after we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we see the example of what following who that baby grew to be led to for one of the first disciples.

In the carol 'Once in Royal David's City', which often begins lesson and carols services, one verse tells us that Christian children should follow the example of how Jesus is depicted to behave in childhood – mild, obedient, honouring and obeying. There is very little in the Gospels about Jesus' childhood (we will hear Luke's episode on the First Sunday of Christmas), but we have plenty of material to follow the example of the adult Jesus, the Messiah, the Saviour as we reflect in wonder and awe at the birth of the baby and what he was destined to grow up to be and do.

To pray – A Collect for St Stephen

Grant us grace, O Lord, that like Stephen we may learn to love even our enemies and seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

St. Stephen by Malcolm Guite

Witness for Jesus, man of fruitful blood,
Your martyrdom begins and stands for all.
They saw the stones, you saw the face of God,
And sowed a seed that blossomed in St. Paul.
When Saul departed breathing threats and slaughter
He had to pass through that Damascus gate
Where he had held the coats and heard the laughter
As Christ, alive in you, forgave his hate,
And showed him the same light you saw from heaven
And taught him, through his blindness, how to see;
Christ did not ask 'Why were you stoning Stephen?'
But 'Saul, why are you persecuting me?'
Each martyr after you adds to his story,
As clouds of witness shine through clouds of glory.

(from Sounding the Seasons)

To Listen (these and other suggestions can be found on a Spotify playlist at

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0F5bU2sf4OiOtQY3q78Rf2?si=a99cbbf61e7d4587>)

- 'Saint Stephen' (Traditional), one version is performed by Magpie Lane. A folk song that narrates what happened to Saint Stephen (as told in the Acts reading above).
- 'Once in Royal David's City', a different take by Will Todd is performed by St Martin's Voices and the Will Todd Ensemble.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.