



**St. Stephen.  
26<sup>th</sup> December 2017**

Leading the great saints who radiate from the Christ-Child is St. Stephen, whose feast is December 26. First of the martyrs, he was stoned by the Jews because he courageously proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah. His name signifies the crowned. In a day like ours, when hatred of enemies floods the minds of children, the soldier-saint Stephen, who loved his enemies, is an excellent model for them and for us.

**READINGS**

**The First Reading**

[2 Chronicles 24: 20–22](#)

**The Psalm**

[Psalm 119: 161–168](#)

**The Second Reading**

[Acts 7: 51–60](#)

**The Gospel Reading**

[Matthew 10: 17–22](#)

[http://bible.oremus.org/?show\\_adj=no&passages=%0A2 Chronicles 24: 20-22 %0A%20Psalm 119: 161-168%0A%20Acts 7: 51-60%0A%20Matthew 10: 17-22](http://bible.oremus.org/?show_adj=no&passages=%0A2%20Chronicles%2024%3A%2020-22%0A%20Psalm%20119%3A%20161-168%0A%20Acts%207%3A%2051-60%0A%20Matthew%2010%3A%2017-22)

## COLLECTS OF THE DAY

### Collect One

Lord,  
we beseech thee, give ear to our prayers,  
and by thy gracious visitation  
lighten the darkness of our hearts  
by our Lord Jesus Christ;  
who liveth and reigneth with thee  
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth  
for the testimony of thy truth,  
we may steadfastly look up to heaven,  
and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed;  
and, being filled with the Holy Spirit,  
may learn to love and bless our persecutors  
by the example of thy first martyr Saint Stephen,  
who prayed for his murderers to thee,  
O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God  
to succour all those that suffer for thee,  
our only Mediator and Advocate.

### Collect Two

God our redeemer,  
who prepared the blessed Virgin Mary  
to be the mother of your Son:  
Grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,  
so we may be ready to greet him  
when he comes again as our judge;  
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

Gracious Father,  
who gave the first martyr Stephen  
grace to pray for those who stoned him:  
Grant that in all our sufferings for the truth  
we may learn to love even our enemies  
and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt,  
looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us,  
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Jesus Christ, our Mediator and Advocate,  
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

## PRAYERS

We give you thanks, O Lord of glory,  
for the example of the first martyr Stephen,  
who looked up to heaven and prayed for his persecutors to your Son Jesus  
Christ,  
who stands at your right hand;  
where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory  
everlasting. **Amen.**

Christ, the New-born, today crowned blessed Stephen.

**Come, let us adore Him.**

Stephen, full of grace and power, was working great wonders and signs  
among the people.

**Thanks be to God.**

You crowned him with glory and honor, O Lord.

**You have given him rule over the works of Your hands.**

Let us pray. Grant, O Lord, we beseech Thee, that we may imitate him whose  
memory we celebrate, so as to learn to love even our enemies; because we  
now solemnize his martyrdom who knew how to pray even for his persecutors  
to our Lord Jesus Christ Thy Son, who liveth and reigneth forever. Alleluia.  
**Alleluia.**

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PEACE

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his name shall be called  
the Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

## PREFACE

You have given Jesus Christ your only Son to be born of the Virgin Mary, and through him you have given us power to become the children of God:

## POST COMMUNION

Heavenly Father,  
you have given us a pledge of eternal redemption.  
Grant that we may always eagerly celebrate  
the saving mystery of the incarnation of your Son.  
We ask this through him whose coming is certain,  
whose day draws near,  
your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Merciful Lord,  
we thank you for these signs of your mercy,  
we praise you for feeding us at your table  
and giving us joy in honouring Stephen,  
first martyr of the new Israel;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## BLESSING

Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one all things earthly and heavenly, fill you with his joy and peace:

## SERMON STARTER 1

**Stephen, deacon, first martyr**

**2 Chronicles 24.20-22; Acts 7.51-end; Matthew 10.17-22**

I once met Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was speaking to a gathering of lawyers, and I happened to be in the right place at the right time to be introduced to him.

He spoke about truth and justice, about the courage and hope he sees in young people, and about what it takes to dare to be different, and to speak out. I suspect that the transcript of what Archbishop Tutu said would not have captured the headlines. What made his words so significant for us was the character, the history, and the achievements of the man that spoke them.

In a similar way, I shall never forget meeting the actress Patricia Hayes. Although best remembered for her comedy parts, it was for her presentation of the title role in *Edna, the Inebriate Woman* that she won a BAFTA award, in [www.churchnewsireland.org](http://www.churchnewsireland.org)

1971. This television drama was a heart-rending story of life bravely lived out in homelessness and alcoholism.

In the clip from the film shown at the award ceremony, we see Edna out of control, roaming round an institution run by nuns, shouting at them: “I’m not the inadequate, I am NOT!” As Ms Hayes received her award, she admitted, with huge empathy and understanding: “I am the inadequate!”

The same depth of feeling was evident when I met her while she was filming in Norfolk. She came to the Shrine at Walsingham, and was very sensitive to the spirituality of the place and its capacity for healing. She lit her candle and said her prayers. “We all need places like this,” she told me, stressing the word “need”. It was said with an actor’s skill, but she meant it.

Archbishop Tutu, with an international reputation for promoting truth and reconciliation, and Patricia Hayes, known at home for depicting heartbreak and the comedy of life: they both had one thing in common. They conveyed the sense that they could see Jesus. Not that they were looking at him whenever they wanted to, but that it was within their capacity.

What has always intrigued me about the account of the martyrdom of St Stephen is the reference to Saul — the still-unregenerate apostle of the Gentiles. It is, of course, a brilliant piece of editorial work by St Luke, though that is no reason to doubt that Saul did witness the brutal execution of the young Christian deacon.

The intriguing thing is just how important the whole sense of seeing is in these encounters. I have tried to describe the inspirational experience of seeing face-to-face two people who communicated a sense of their own visionary capacity. What did Saul make of seeing Stephen?

Luke turns up the intensity of the scene as the martyrdom is played out. When death approaches, Stephen speaks to Jesus, whom he has seen in glory at the Father’s right hand. Herein lies the origin of Saul’s conversion. He can hold out only for so long against the transformative example of seeing in the flesh someone who is as alive as Stephen.

It would, I think, be a cop-out to continue at this point by saying that we who have sung our carols and worshipped at the crib this Christmas have seen Jesus, so let the world sit up and take notice. The “seeing Jesus” that I witnessed in Desmond Tutu and Patricia Hayes, and that a tough nut such as Saul saw in Stephen — this was not easily achieved, nor was it superficial.

The kind of seeing we are talking about is like the experience of labouring to learn a foreign language. We struggle to begin with, and are not very good at mastering the accent. But at some point there is a breakthrough, and we say: “Oh, I see how this works.” We may not be fluent, but we have developed some familiarity with the language, and perhaps we can begin to make ourselves understood.

Recently I was at a meeting with young clerics in the diocese of York, and heard from one of them an example of the struggle that goes into seeking the charisma of seeing Jesus. The example was a mission initiative by young people, which involved a significant commitment of time and financial sacrifice, in order to live and witness to their faith in some of the most deprived areas of Manchester.

This project sounded like a contemporary version of the early monastic communities, pushing the personal boundaries of how to experience seeing Jesus. The challenges of silence and self-renunciation offered significant attraction as a protest against conforming to the limited aspirations of this noisy and distracted world.

Linking Christian faith so emphatically to renunciation can open dangers of spiritual pride and an imbalance that devalues the material world and our appreciation of its beauty. But the point about renunciation should not be overlooked. Being a Christian involves us in personal cost, as we struggle to learn the language, behaviour, and culture of the civilisation of love.

So don't settle just for tinsel and turkey this Christmas. Live life with a bigger vision: of hope, of heaven, of a better world.

Martin Warner in The Church Times

## **SERMON STARTER            2**

I suspect one of the bigger disappointments for many in the Church—and perhaps especially for those outside of it—is the persistence of conflict in Christ's Body. There is something in us that knows such conflict is fundamentally wrong. While we are resigned to it in most dimensions of life, there is rightly a sense that in matters of faith such resort to argument, bitterness, and (particularly) violence is a sign of tremendous failure. The justification for much conflict in the Church is similarly wrong: “that's just the way it is,” or some version of “conflict is the only way to sort the true believers from the false ones.” This has all the wisdom of the Vietnam-era saying “to save the village, we must destroy the village.” Conflict does so much damage

within communities of faith that, when all is said and done, it is hard to see what the benefits really were.

This is particularly true when conflict moves from a simple difference of opinion to enmity. It takes very little to go from vilifying an idea to vilifying a person. Once it "gets personal," the cycle of conflict moves with a seemingly inexorable logic. The story of St. Stephen's death at the hands of religious opponents provides one of the most clear-cut examinations of this sorry state of affairs. It also provides us a way through it.

Conflict does continue to happen, and Christians must have a response. When it comes to the personal dimension of conflict, that response must of necessity be the one Jesus taught: pray for those who persecute you. This completely counter-cultural phenomenon in the Gospel is rather like the landing craft in an amphibious assault. It is the way a beachhead for peace is established on earth.

Christ's life was a living prayer. His birth at Christmas was the beginning of his prayer to the Father for a divided and broken humanity. He taught those who would follow him to do the same. For us it is always essential, whenever conflict sets in, to make clear that whatever the wrong we may confront, we do not do so with the notion that we ourselves, or an ideology or a program we carry, are the solution. The solution is to become part of Christ's eternal prayer to the Father.

This is what St. Stephen became in his martyrdom. He was no hate-filled terrorist, no ideological prig needing to bring on a riot to settle scores or accomplish his plan for revolution. His conflict with the Sanhedrin was not "his" conflict: it was the Sanhedrin's conflict with truth itself. Stephen held a mirror up to them, confronting them with what they had become. Their response to was take down the mirror, to kill Stephen. The sign that this was so was his response. He asked forgiveness for those killing him. For Stephen, it was always clear that he was only the mirror, not the light itself. For him, the battle was already over, and had been so since Christ had brought his perfected humanity to his Father's throne in the Ascension and presented it to him in his unique, completely selfless victory.

Conflicts are not a fact of the human condition: they are the result of an ongoing choice of humanity. By choosing to make the conflict "ours," we continue the apparently "natural" cycle of alienation, violence, and retribution. St. Stephen, whom we have remembered and honored today, shows us this supposed inevitability may be challenged and overturned by opening up our



life so completely to Christ's life that his grace, his prayer, his justice, his victory becomes ours.

## **ONLINE SERMON SOURCES**

### **The Martyrs and St. Stephen**

Today, as you know very well, is December 26<sup>th</sup> but what you may not know is today is St. Stephen's Day. Today is named after the first Christian martyr whose story is told in the sixth chapter of Acts.

A martyr is a person who dies for his or her belief in Jesus Christ. Jesus said that no greater love has this than a person lays down his life for his friends and Jesus himself gave his life on the cross.

Today is a trilogy of three important Christmas dates and stories: December 26<sup>th</sup> which commemorates St. Stephen and his martyrdom. December 27<sup>th</sup> which commemorates St. John the Apostle who was martyred on an island called Patmos. December 28<sup>th</sup> in which we commemorate the little children two years and under who were slaughtered by the evil King Herod. December 28<sup>th</sup> is called the Feast of the Holy Innocents. So we have three consecutive days during the Christmas season, December 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup> during which we can easily preach on the theme of martyrdom.

[http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_a\\_the\\_martyrs\\_and\\_ststephen.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_the_martyrs_and_ststephen.htm)

## **HYMN SUGGESTIONS**

### **1st Reading 2 Chronicles 24: 20–22**

381\* God has spoken – by his prophets

Alternative Jeremiah 26: 12–15

1st Reading 381\* God has spoken – by his prophets

### **Psalm 119: 161–168**

382\* Help us, O Lord to learn

358\* King of glory, King of peace

16\* Like a mighty river flowing

383\* Lord, be thy word my rule

384\* Lord, thy word abideth

### **2nd Reading Acts 7: 51–60**

460 For all your saints in glory, for all your saints at rest (vv. 1, 2t, 3)

550\* 'Forgive our sins as we forgive'

693\* Glory in the highest to the God of heaven



696\* God, we praise you! God, we bless you!

553\* Jesu, lover of my soul

8\* The Lord is King! Lift up your voice

**The Gospel Matthew 10: 17–22**

589 Lord, speak to me that I may speak

593\* O Jesus, I have promised

597\* Take my life, and let it be

Also suitable

250\* All hail the power of Jesu's name

459\* For all the saints who from their labours rest

461\* For all thy saints, O Lord

471 Rejoice in God's saints, today and all days

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