

On the Feast of Stephen

'Twas the day after Christmas and there in the church
Were members in pews, each on one their perch.
The prayer in each heart as they sang Christmas songs
Was that Pastor Chris Boyer wouldn't drone on too long.
But up in the pulpit he arose with a shout
To read about Stephen, what's that all about?
We've waited all Advent to hear the Babe's story
Now he's skipped it entire! Good Golly! Good Glory!
He'll make us all listen to some story from Acts —
This preacher's a loon and them's the cold facts!
He's talking about some old Slavic king
Who was really a Duke, now ain't that a thing!
From Stephen the Deacon to Vaclav the Duke
Our preacher careens, an historical kook!
At least while he's up there, his gums all a flap,
We'll all have time for a Boxing Day nap.
And so they all muttered as each eye shut tight,
"Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night."

Now that I have your attention...

It is indeed the day after Christmas, known to those from England and those more recently separated from the British Empire, such as the Canadians and Australians, as Boxing Day. There are a number of theories about how the day acquired this name. Some would have you believe it refers to what happens to the ears of children whose parents are fed up after a full day of whining about missing batteries and already broken toys. This, however, is a base canard. Nor does it refer to the mountains of boxes placed in recycling bins for removal after present opening is finished or the thousands of boxes that are even now being prepared for a trip to the never-ending return lines at the mall. There is a connection with the boxes of festive food and hostess gifts being taken to neighbors' houses today as folks turn from family celebrations to those with friends as some traditions go. Most sources agree that the title Boxing Day does indeed derive from boxes of gifts.

Traditionally, the gifts given on Boxing Day are gifts given without expectation of reciprocation. These have included the little checks and gifts given to the paperboy, the milkman and others who provide us with services in the course of the year. This custom evolved from the practice of wealthy landowners in England and other parts of Europe, who would give their household staff the day off on the day after Christmas and send them off to their families with boxes full of food and little gifts as a reward for a year of good service. This custom may in turn have evolved from a practice of churches which opened their alms boxes on the day after Christmas to distribute the collected coins to the poor. Gift boxes, alms boxes, hence Boxing Day. Most sources are agreed that this oldest tradition of a distribution to the poor on December 26th was motivated by the Church Calendar, which names this day after Christmas as the Feast of St. Stephen. Are you with me so far?

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The connection between St. Stephen and a distribution to the poor comes from the verses in Acts 6 just prior to those suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary which I read earlier. Here's what we find in the first six verses of Acts 6: "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch." Stephen and his colleagues were charged with distributing food to the poor and making sure that everyone got a fair share. Think of them as the Food Bank volunteers of their time. They were given the title of *δῆακονος* or servant, a title that has persisted in the church to this day as "deacon".

Of course, to this point in the story of Stephen and the deacons there is no real indication of why Stephen merits a feast day named for him or why it should fall on the day after Christmas. But as we heard earlier, Stephen did not confine his activities for Christ to serving at table. He was also a preacher and teacher of some power, so much so that he aroused the enmity of the same Sanhedrin that had recently condemned Jesus to death. He was hauled before them on trumped up charges with false witnesses and proceeded, faithfully but perhaps imprudently, to preach the gospel of Jesus to them just as he'd been preaching in the synagogue. You may know the end of the story. "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."

Stephen was the first of Jesus' disciples to follow his Lord in death for the sake of the gospel, the first Christian martyr. In the manner of his death, being railroaded by the religious authorities, and in his steadfastness and his final forgiveness of those who murdered him, he so closely followed in the footsteps of Jesus that the Church chose over the centuries to remember him on the day after the commemoration of Christ's birth. Like Jesus, it seemed, the faithful Stephen had come for to die.

But let's step back for a moment to the early part of Stephen's story. His service to the poor means that we have an old church tradition of the distribution of help to the needy named after one of the first in the early Church to take charge of such work. That helps us understand why a good-hearted king in Europe's Dark Ages might decide to go and help a struggling peasant he spots on the day after Christmas, or "the feast of Stephen," as the song puts it. But what about the rest of that story? Who was Wenceslas? Other than a random act of kindness, what qualifies him to be the subject of a Christmas carol?

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Like Stephen, Good King Wenceslas is a historical figure we know a little bit about. He wasn't a king, for starters, and he wouldn't have called himself Wenceslas, but he was a devout Christian and renowned for his generosity to the poor. In his own language, his name was Vaclav and he was the Duke of Bohemia, living from approximately 907 to 935, a short 28 years. Historical Bohemia now lies mostly in the Czech Republic and Vaclav has been considered the patron saint of the Bohemians or the Czechs for centuries. His name is still revered – you may remember the great Czech playwright and first President of the Republic, Vaclav Havel, or the great gathering place in the center of Prague, which we call Wenceslas Square. The historical Duke Vaclav was just a third-generation Christian. His grandfather, Duke Borivoj was converted from paganism by the preaching of the apostles to the Slavs, the famous Sts. Cyril and Methodius. If you've not heard before of those founders of the Slavic churches, you may know that Russian and most other Slavic languages are written in the Cyrillic alphabet, which tradition says was created by the saint to translate the Bible into Russian. But I digress...

This recent conversion of his family meant trouble in the life of young Vaclav. Although his grandparents and his father were devout, his mother was Christian in name only, actually retaining her pagan beliefs. When Vaclav's father died when the boy was 13, his mother was named regent and did everything she could to turn Bohemia and her son back to paganism, including having his grandmother, who nurtured the boy's faith, strangled. When Vaclav turned 18, he took control of the duchy and had his mother exiled. But that was not the end of his trouble.

According to biographies written just a few decades after the young duke's death, one of Vaclav's first acts was to build a cathedral in Prague, the Cathedral of St. Vitus, which still stands. He was a wise ruler, despite his youth, keeping his country out of the wars that raged around them by strategic alliances with stronger nations. It was his piety and generosity that made him legendary, however. Writing not quite 200 years later, Cosmas of Prague repeats what had been written earlier: "no one doubts that, rising every night from his noble bed, with bare feet and only one chamberlain, he went around to God's churches and gave alms generously to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty, so much so that he was considered, not a prince, but the father of all the wretched."

Being beloved by the people, sadly, was no guarantee of a long reign for rulers in those days. Vaclav's younger brother, Boleslav, had followed their mother's religion rather than their father's and he quickly became the leader for a group of pagan nobles who did not care for Vaclav's policies and alliances. Boleslav invited Vaclav to celebrate the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian with him and, despite being warned it was a trap, Vaclav went to his brother's home, hoping to be reconciled. Nothing untoward happened at the feast itself but, the next morning, as Vaclav headed for church, Boleslav and three friends ambushed him and killed him, according to some versions of the story on the very steps of the church. Vaclav was Bohemia's first Christian martyr.

This, in fact, is Vaclav's second tie to Stephen. Both young men acted upon their faith in Christ Jesus by ministering to the poor, the hungry, widows and orphans. Both died young proclaiming their faith, Stephen while preaching to the Sanhedrin and Vaclav by trusting his brother and attending worship while surrounded by hostile pagans.

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Feeding the poor. Dying for faith. Are these really appropriate topics for us as we bask in the glow of family celebration, with plenty to eat and newly opened presents still dominating our thoughts? Is this really the right kind of message for the day after Christmas? The answer is yes, of course, for the whole panoply of life falls under the Lordship of Christ, the man who grew from that babe in the manger, the man who was God. It is right and proper that we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation in which the Word became Flesh and in which the Creation was sanctified anew by the Creator. It is right and proper that we enjoy the abundance with which God has blessed us and that we use a portion of it to bring smiles to those we love. But we must also remember that Jesus was born poor, a peasant baby in an occupied land, cradled in a borrowed space. We must also remember our duty to all who have less than we do, the ones Jesus called, “the least of these, my brothers and sisters.” We remember that the one born in Bethlehem that day was not meant to rule from an earthly throne but rather to be the Suffering Servant of God, destined to die for the sake of all.

During our time of Advent, we looked forward; forward to the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, forward to his return yet to come, forward to each day that his gifts of hope, peace, joy and love are reborn in our hearts. Now it is Christmas and we celebrate but we also continue to look forward. The Kingdom is among us but it is not fulfilled yet. The Beloved Community is gathering but it is not complete yet. But “lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold; when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.” My sisters and my brothers, until that day dawns, there is much to be done. With the renewed spirit of Christmas in our hearts, let us move ahead in love. May God grant that we, like good King Wenceslas, like Stephen the Deacon, have the courage and the faith to walk in the way of Jesus. Amen.