

Sermon on Saint Stephen's Day 2021

Sermon by Shilo Varughese

Acts 7. 51-end; Matthew 10. 17-22.

The night before yesterday, and then yesterday, we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ. Suddenly, today, we just heard Jesus warn of persecution, death and hatred for his name.

And also, we have just heard of the death of Stephen, one of the seven deacons appointed by the Apostles, and the first martyrdom in the history of the Christian Church.

What is the significance of the martyrdom of Stephen when we celebrate Christmas, the feast of the birth of Jesus?

We all may be familiar with the iconic slogan which was launched by the animal charity, the Dog's Trust, that says, 'A dog is for life, not just for Christmas.'

This slogan influenced me to reflect deeply as a Christmas person: where is Christ in me? What is the real meaning of Christmas in my life? Is it the gifts under the tree, the cards in the mail, the Christmas dinner with family and friends, or the Merry Christmas calls on the street? Then keep silent for 11 months and repeat the same drama in the next season. Is it truly Christmas?

But the life of St Stephen manifests more clearly to us an important meaning of the Christmas celebration because his life had direct parallels with the life of Christ and his teachings.

Stephen was a man of great faith and he was filled with, and led by, the Holy Spirit.

With that grace and power, he accomplishes signs and wonders among the people, as Christ did.

In our Gospel reading we read Jesus' words of warning to his disciples, "Beware of persecutors, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles" (Matthew 10: 17,18).

As Jesus prophesied to his disciples, Stephen had to face the council and he went through the trial.

St. Luke tells us that Stephen was sitting there with the face of an angel while his opponents were lying about him. He was peaceful even in the face of condemnation.

Stephen was close to his Saviour and was experiencing the peace and love of Christmas.

Stephen was a man who was full of passion for Christ. He was full of passion to share the Good News in love and in self-giving.

When Stephen had an opportunity to speak, in the power of the Spirit, he preached the Gospel boldly to the Council. He tried to remind them of the story of redemption starting from their forefather Abraham, down through Joseph and Moses.

Saint Stephen makes no compromises concerning the truth and he proclaimed that Jesus is the Son of God.

Even to the last moment he forgives those who persecuted him.

Stephen prayed the same way Jesus prayed on the cross for those who killed him: "Lord do not hold this sin against them."

There is no fulfilment of the feast of Christmas without embracing the cross. Therefore, to be a Christian means to witness and preach Christ crucified, risen and standing at the right hand of God, and be ready to accept the consequences that can follow our witness to the truth.

Therefore, remember today, we are the Christmas people, living in the grace and the love of God. But remember also that God calls us to be Christmas people every day.

The joy of Christmas is something that should permeate every aspect of our lives, so that we can be witnesses, even to our enemies and even to those who would hate us, of the love and grace which God has manifested to us by his Son.

The life, witness and death of Saint Stephen reminds us that Jesus is the reason for the season. But, Jesus is not just for the Christmas season. We are called to celebrate Christ in season and out of season as Saint Stephen did.

So, let us rejoice in Christ. Amen.