

ON THE FEAST OF STEPHEN¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the First Sunday after Christmas, 26 December 2021, being also the Feast of St Stephen, Deacon and Protomartyr

Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even
Brightly shone the moon that night
Though the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight
Gathering winter fuel

Hither, page, and stand by me,
If thou know'st it, telling
Yonder peasant, who is he?
Where and what his dwelling?
Sire, he lives a good league hence,
Underneath the mountain
Right against the forest fence
By Saint Agnes fountain.

Wenceslas was, of course, a real person, Duke of Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, from about 911 to 929.² He was possibly assassinated by his younger brother, Boleslaus, making him a martyr. Canonised almost immediately, he was also posthumously denoted a king.

It is easy to imagine that the carol bearing his name is as old as the legend. In fact, it was written by the British Tractarian priest, John Mason Neale, in 1853.³ We know Neale as the translator of Greek and Latin hymns such as “Come, ye faithful, raise the strain”, which we sing at Easter⁴ and ‘Come thou Redeemer of the earth’, which we sang last Sunday.⁵ “A great and mighty wonder”, our first hymn this morning is also one of his.⁶ He has 39 hymns in the *New English Hymnal*. The carol’s popularity rose with the development of modern Christmas celebrations during the 19th century.

The story of the carol is fictional. Neale wrote it drawing on the king’s reputation for good deeds to the poor. As a child, I liked the carol very much but had great difficulty in imagining what it must be like to live underground, that is, underneath the mountain and yet

¹ Readings: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

² [Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia - Wikipedia](#)

³ [The real story behind the carol Good King Wenceslas - Classic FM](#) Neale published it in his: [Collected hymns, sequences and carols of John Mason Neale \[microform\] \(archive.org\)](#), p.287. Neale notes, “words original”.

Neale set his carol to *Tempus adest floridum*, a 13th century spring carol, which is the tune we still use. [Tempus Adest Floridum - YouTube](#)

⁴ *New English Hymnal* 106, by St John of Damascus and translated from Greek by Neale.

⁵ *New English Hymnal* 19 by St Ambrose and translated from the Latin by Neale.

⁶ *New English Hymnal*, 21 by St Germanus and translated from the Greek by Neale and others

also up against a fence, not to mention alongside a fountain. Quite a confusing address description for a child.

At this time of year, we have no snow of any kind. But we do have the Feast of Stephen, and it is today. Stephen drew the short straw when it came to the allocation of saints' days in the liturgical calendar. Who goes to church on Boxing Day? And when 26 December falls on a Sunday, as it does today, Stephen is edged out by the Christmas season. We can transfer the celebration to 3 August and, this year, Stephen is lucky. His alternative feast falls on a Wednesday and he will, therefore, get a Choral Evensong all to himself.

There is a good reason for remembering Stephen at Christmas. In 1553, the Italian, Lorenzo Lotto, painted a nativity scene. It is typical of its time, a barn with a chubby, and clearly not newborn, Jesus in a manger being adored by Joseph and Mary. Above, some cherubs hold a sheet of music while they sing. Through an arch, a shepherd can be seen with his flock. If you look carefully, however, you will see a crucifix on the barn wall. Its inclusion is anachronistic, it will be 33 years until the crucifixion. Of course, Lotto knew that. He is using that symbol to draw to our attention that this apparently idyllic story will not end well.

That is why it is appropriate to celebrate Stephen on this day, the next after Christmas. We first come across Stephen in Acts 6. Not surprisingly, the new movement was taken unawares by its success. It grew at a rate well beyond the expectations of the small group of original followers. As Jesus had said, following him was divisive within families. Some, previously dependent on their families, were cast out, particularly widows. Widows and orphans were vulnerable in Jewish society. That is why the duty to care for them is so frequently mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures. The new church had daily distributions of food and friction arose when the Hellenists, that is, Greek speaking converts, complained that the Hebrews, that is, Aramaic speaking converts, were getting a better deal.

The apostles found that they couldn't handle all this and do their main tasks as well. So, they decided to delegate organisational activities to others. What they actually said was, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables".⁷ The Greek word used for "wait" was διακονεῖν, from which we derive the word "deacon". For this reason, those to whom the organisational tasks were delegated are regarded as the first deacons, a New Testament group that included both men and women. Thus, all the traditional depictions of Stephen have him dressed in a deacon's dalmatic of the kind we continue to use today.

The first group comprised seven men. The first to be named was Stephen, who is described as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit". The remaining six included Philip, the man who engaged in conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch.⁸ The apostles laid hands upon them, setting the form for ordination when it later developed.

We would be mistaken to regard Stephen as simply a jumped-up waiter. Acts says, "Full of grace and power, [he] did great signs and wonders among the people".⁹ He entered into argument with the members of a synagogue composed of former slaves from Alexandria, North Africa and Asia Minor. When they found that they could not overcome him, they laid false charges against Stephen before the religious court.

⁷ Acts 6:2

⁸ Acts 8:26-40

⁹ Acts 6:8

In his defence, Stephen delivered a long speech that takes up 53 verses of Acts 8. Using substantial references to the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, he rehearsed the history of the relationship between God and the Hebrew people, beginning with Abraham and ending with the rejection of the prophets and, ultimately, Jesus. Finally, he accused his judges, saying, “You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it”.¹⁰

Acts then goes on to complete the story and, almost incidentally, introduces to the Christian narrative Saul, also known as Paul:

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. And Saul approved of their killing him.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.¹¹

Thus, Stephen became Christianity’s first martyr, giving rise to his being entitled in the calendar “Deacon and Protomartyr”.

We began this morning with a poem derived from legend and we will end the same way. In his online journal, Irish Anglican scholar, Patrick Comerford, recounts a 14th century poem about Stephen. This poem gives a completely unbiblical account of the life and death of Stephen, placing him as a waiter at King Herod’s banquet. Stephen renounces all the outward pomp of his royal master in favour of the vulnerable child of Bethlehem. The poem ends by noting that the eve of Stephen’s feast is, appropriately, Christmas Day.¹² Here is part of the poem [read section in bold]:

**Saint Stephen was a clerk
In King Herod’s hall,
And servéd him of bread and cloth
As every king befalle.**

**Stephen out of kitchen came
With boar’s head on hand,
He saw a star was fair and bright
Over Bethlehem stande.**

**He cast adown the boar’s head
And went into the hall:**

¹⁰ Acts 7:53

¹¹ Acts 7:54-8:1

¹² [Patrick Comerford: Christmas Poems \(12\): Saint Stephen was a clerk](#) See also [Saint Stephen and Herod - Wikipedia](#)

**‘I forsake thee, Herod,
And thy werkés all.**

**‘I forsake thee, King Herod,
And thy werkés all,
There is a child in Bethlehem born
Is better than we all.’**

‘What aileth thee, Stephen?
What is thee befalle?
Lacketh thee either meat or drink
In King Herod’s hall?’

‘Lacketh me neither meat ne drink
In King Herod’s hall;
There is a child in Bethlem born
Is better than we all.’—

‘What aileth thee, Stephen?
Art wode or thou ’ginnest to brede?
Lacketh thee either gold or fee,
Or any rich weede?’

‘Lacketh me neither gold ne fee
Ne none rich weede;
There is a child in Bethlem born
Shall helpen us at our need.’

‘That is all so sooth, Stephen,
All so sooth, I-wys,
As this capon crowé shall
That li’th here in my dish.’

That word was not so soon said,
That word in that hall,
The capon crew “*Christus natus est*”
Among the lordés all.

**‘Riseth up, my tormentors,
By two, and all by one,
And leadeth Stephen out of this town,
And stoneth him with stone.’**

**Tooken they Stephen
And stoned him in the way;
And therefore is his even
On Christe’s own day.**

XI

TEMPUS ADEST FLORIDUM.

GOOD King Wenceslas look'd out,
 On the Feast of Stephen;
 When the snow lay round about,
 Deep, and crisp, and even :
 Brightly shone the moon that night,
 Though the frost was cruel,
 When a poor man came in sight,
 Gath'ring winter fuel.

" A spring
 carol of the
 13th century."
 Words original

" Hither, page, and stand by me,
 If thou know'st it, telling,
 Yonder peasant, who is he?
 Where and what his dwelling? "
 " Sire, he lives a good league hence.
 Underneath the mountain;
 Right against the forest fence,
 By Saint Agnes' fountain."

" Bring me flesh, and bring me wine,
 Bring me pine-logs hither :
 Thou and I will see him dine,
 When we hear them thither."
 Page and monarch forth they went,
 Forth they went together;
 Through the rude wind's wild lament
 And the bitter weather.

" Sire, the night is darker now,
 And the wind blows stronger;
 Fails my heart, I know not how;
 I can go no longer."
 " Mark my footsteps, good my page;
 Tread thou in them boldly :
 Thou shalt find the winter's rage
 Freeze thy blood less coldly."

In his master's steps he trod,
 Where the snow lay dinted;
 Heat was in the very sod
 Which the Saint had printed.
 Therefore, Christian men, be sure,
 Wealth or rank possessing,
 Ye who now will bless the poor,
 Shall yourselves find blessing.

Alternative
 last four lines
 by author.

[Wherefore, Christian people, know,
 Who my lay are hearing,
 He who cheers another's woe
 Shall himself find cheering.]

Facsimile from Mary Sackville Lawson (ed) (J M Neale's daughter) *Collected Hymns, Sequences and Carols of John Mason Neale*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1914



Statue of St Wenceslas in St Vitus Cathedral, Prague



The Nativity (1523)
Lorenzo Lotto (c1480–1556/57)
Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art



Martyrdom of Saint Stephen
Giovanni Andrea de Ferrari (1598-1669)
Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti, Genoa