

**26 December 2021, St Stephen**  
**Acts 7: 51-60; Matthew 10: 17 - 22**

**1. Boxing Day**

I am told that Boxing Day is the day when many people look at Right move – the site for those who are looking for a new home. It has also traditionally a time when the sales began, when shops were full of people looking for a bargain. One of the busiest times of the year for shoppers, though COVID has changed this recently. For other people, it may just be a quiet day after the excitement of Christmas Day – a day for cold turkey and salads, when parents can relax and children can enjoy their new toys.

There is also a long tradition of Boxing Day being a time when people gave money – or ‘boxes’ either to the poor or to the tradespeople who served them throughout the year: those delivering the post or collecting the bins, perhaps, and this is a tradition in Britain that has been traced back to the Middle Ages.

**2. A connection to Stephen?**

So is there a connection to St Stephen, the first Christian martyr? Our readings today tell of his death, and also record Jesus’ warning to his followers that there would be persecution and division on account of this message – a far cry from yesterdays

readings about the baby and the shepherds. We seem today to have a complete change of tone.

Stephen was indeed the first martyr for the Christian faith, but we know that he was also a deacon, one of 70 appointed by the church to look after the widows and orphans and the poor. In today’s church, ‘deacon’ is the word we use for the first ordination, which is often seen as a stepping stone towards priesthood, but in some countries, it is rather more than this. In the church in Scandinavia, for example, they have preserved the distinctiveness of this calling. We have a Danish friend who trained within the church as a nurse and also a Deacon. He can take services, but also has secular employment in a caring profession.

All priest in our own church are first ordained as Deacons, and there are some who do not progress to be priests. In the days before Women were allowed to be priests, they could train only to be a deaconess.

The Danish model is much closer to that in the Bible, and this is a ministry that Stephen was called to – a ministry of practical service. Yet we also know that his witness to his

faith enraged those around him to the extent that they stoned him to death. His death had even greater significance for the early church, in that the man destined to be one of its greatest leaders and advocates – Saul, who was later St Paul - approved of Stephen’s murder.

At the start of our service we sang the familiar carol ‘Good King Wenceslas’. This fictional king is also portrayed as one who cared for the poor.

### **3. And how does this relate to Christmas?**

So how does all this tie in with the great feast of Christmas, and the celebration of the birth of Jesus? Well, we heard that Jesus came as the light of the world, and that his light shows us how to live, and what love really means.

I think that one of the benefits of COVID has been that it has increased our awareness of the importance of many people who keep us going: such as those who serve in our shops, those who deliver food and other goods. It is not just those who work in the NHS who we have thanked God for in this past year.

So today is a day to be thankful, rather than selfish. It is a day to serve others, rather than grabbing for ourselves. This is the

sacrificial love that Jesus came to show us. It can indeed be costly – not perhaps in this country leading to persecution or martyrdom, but still costly, putting our own interests to one side. Let us today commit ourselves to follow that path that Jesus was born to show us, led by his spirit, and assured of God’s love for us. **Amen**