

**Margaret Joachim**

You might think we'd be allowed Christmas for more than twenty-four hours, but no. In the church calendar the days after Christmas are, successively, the feasts of St Stephen (deacon and first Christian martyr), St John the Evangelist (first Christian theologian), the Holy Innocents (all the children killed by Herod) and Thomas Becket (the archbishop of Canterbury murdered on the orders of Henry II). With the exception of John, this is not a cheerful collection. To what extent the arrangement is deliberate I don't know. The dates of particular celebrations emerged as 'custom' over a long period; they were not initially fixed and could vary in different traditions. But however they got here, they do now form a significant sequence. Christ's incarnation is the ultimate expression of God's love, and is followed in quick succession by examples of humble service, detailed understanding and outright opposition. A potted history of Christianity in just five days.

If you know anything about Stephen at all, you know that he was stoned to death. You may also know that St Paul (then plain Saul) witnessed the stoning. And you may think that 26<sup>th</sup> December was the day on which Good King Wenceslas went out. Wenceslas did exist. He was a tenth-century Duke of Bohemia and was certainly a devout and generous man. He too was murdered – by his brother - for his beliefs. But there is no evidence whatsoever that the story in the carol is true. Wenceslas was canonised not long after his death and his celebration is in September, so he has no actual connection with Stephen at all. Which was an interesting rabbit-hole to go down, but we should mix our metaphors and our menagerie and return to our mutttons (as the French have it).

Today's first reading gives us only the end of the story. It began with an argument. In the early days of Christianity all the believers were living together as a community, sharing whatever they had. Part of this work included providing for widows who had no family to support them – a common charitable activity at the time. The Hellenists (who were Greek-speaking Jews) complained about the Hebrews (the Aramaic-speaking Jews) because Hellenist widows were losing out when the food was being distributed. So the apostles made a decision, and in doing so they created the first hierarchy within the group. They would concentrate on prayer and teaching, and they would appoint seven other men to 'wait on tables'. This is exactly the division seen in the gospels between Mary and Martha – and simply because the apostles were the apostles they effectively elevated prayer and evangelism above service, a distinction which in many ways remains to this day.

Stephen was one of the seven deacons (in Greek, *diakonia* simply means 'service'). He and the other six were consecrated to serve the community. They were men 'in good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom'. We know nothing of the others apart from their names, but Stephen was clearly much more than a servant. He was clearly an educated man who knew the scriptures and could expound them eloquently. He was 'full of grace and power, and did great wonders and signs among the people'. He was a natural teacher and leader, yet he was chosen to wait on tables – to work in the canteen. He undertook a menial role and deliberately used it to be as close as possible to ordinary people so that he could spread the word of God. I like to imagine Stephen talking about God while taking the plates round,

teaching scripture over the washing-up and explaining why Jesus was the Messiah while sweeping the floor. Every encounter gave him the opportunity to talk about his beliefs while just getting on with his job. There is no work, however mundane, that cannot be done in a spirit of service and to the glory of God.

Then, things started to change. Stephen debated at length and very eloquently with members of one of the local synagogues. When they could not refute his arguments, instead of accepting them they became increasingly angry, whipping up the religious leaders and the crowd against him, just as the Jewish leaders had stirred up the crowd to condemn Jesus. Stephen must have realised the likely consequences, but he was fearless. Inspired by a heavenly vision he continued to preach and to pray as they stoned him, forgiving them as he died, just as Jesus had forgiven his persecutors.

It may be accidental that Stephen is celebrated immediately after Christmas – but maybe not. His life exactly reflects the sequence of those five days: love, service, understanding, evangelism and opposition. His faith and witness were evident not only in what he said but in how he lived and ultimately how he died. He was no pure plaster saint – the language he used to excoriate the members of the Jewish council was exceedingly rude. No wonder they were so angry. He was someone who rolled up his sleeves and got his hands dirty. He is an example to each of us of the holiness of life in our work, and he exemplifies the courage we may need to maintain and proclaim our beliefs in the face of hostility. We won't be martyred (though Christians are still stoned in some parts of the world). It's much more likely that we will simply be ignored, or perhaps treated as being slightly embarrassing. It is so easy to retreat into that safe little group of people who think the same way that we do. Stephen shows us that the Christmas message of God's love requires us to speak up for Jesus, and to face the consequences unflinchingly.