

Boxing Day Sermon 2021

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him, words from our second reading, the letter to the Colossians, the third chapter, the 17th verse. May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the church's calendar today is normally St Stephen's Day. As it's Sunday, the first Sunday of Christmas trumps St Stephen. This seems especially unfair on Stephen - who as the first martyr, the first recorded person in the history of the Church to be killed for their faith in Christ, is given the honour of having his feast day immediately after the birth of Christ.

This has always struck me as a bit of a mixed blessing, especially nowadays, as the day after Christmas tends to be a day spent recovering from the excesses of the previous day. Few of us make a special effort to celebrate the witness of the first person to follow in the footsteps of Christ in being unjustly put to death.

The way in which Stephen's death is recounted in the book of Acts is designed to show us that Stephen is following in Christ's footsteps. Stephen echoes some of Christ's own words on the cross as he is stoned to death: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' For Stephen, following in Christ's footsteps means being martyred, bearing witness to Christ through an unjust death on account of his faith.

St Stephen's Day has entered into our celebrations of Christmas through the carol 'Good King Wenceslas'. The events of this carol take place of St Stephen's Day. Good King Wenceslas looks out on the feast of Stephen. He sees

a poor man gathering fuel and instructs his page to send the poor man food and fuel. The page struggles to make it through the wintry weather, but the King invites the page to follow in his footsteps. And so the King leads the page through the snow. "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.

The message of the carol is that we should follow in the King's footsteps and be just as generous to those poorer than ourselves: Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing, Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing.

Stephen follows Christ to the cross. Wenceslas follows Christ's example to the poor and the marginalised. We are invited to do likewise, to follow in the footsteps of Christ, the one who leads us through the very storms of life to himself.

Our reading from Colossians spells out for us the shape of lives lived in the footsteps of Christ. Lives lived with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Lives of forbearance, forgiveness, love, perfect harmony.

All of this, we might think is too good to be true. What if those around us are anything but kind? What if we find ourselves impatient or in homes and communities that are anything but harmonious? What if we have been short with others or sown division through word or action in our homes or amongst family and friends?

'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.'

Following Christ's footsteps does not mean we are called to be perfect - only Christ is perfect.

Following in Christ's footsteps means we come to worship as we do each week to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. To acknowledge the ways we failed to follow in Christ's footsteps as we do each week at the start of our service with our words of confession. To encounter Christ, and to commit ourselves little by little to follow more closely in the footsteps of Christ. To grow in wisdom, even as the infant Christ, grows in wisdom in our Gospel reading. To follow in the footsteps of the saints who have gone before us as examples of how to follow in the footsteps of Christ, to ask them for their prayers to help us on our way, and to ask ourselves how are we helping those around us to follow in Christ's footsteps? Are we living up to the call of Colossians: to do whatever we do, in word or deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus?