

Saint Thomas and St Thomas of the Air Church
Sunday after Christmas
St Stephen's Day
December 26, 2021
rmcneely+

We celebrate today the life, work and example of St Stephen.

We met St Stephen in the pages of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, left to us by St Luke.

We infer that Stephen was of Greek origin
Because of his Greek name:
And his fluency with the Greek language.

He was born in the year 5 AD and lived only 31 years.

Stephen's great intellect and reasoning have led some to believe that he must have been educated in one of the two great Rabbinical Schools, most likely the School of Gamaliel in Jerusalem.

We began life as a devout Jew. But with the Earthly ministry of Jesus became one of the early Christians.

While it is unclear whether he met Jesus face to face
Many suspect that Stephen was among the 70 disciples that Jesus sent out to teach the Gospel to all who would hear it.

The early Church in Jerusalem flourished
And soon was challenged to care for the poor,
The widowed and the orphaned in its midst.
Especially the newly converted Hellenistic Jews
Christians of Greek descent.

As now, there were far too few priests
to bring alms to all in need.
So they held what we would refer to as a synod
And voted to bring forward 7 men
Who would assist the priests (then known as presbyters)
With their duties.
The first man selected and ordained was Stephen
Who became the first Deacon of the Church.

His major task was to bring food, water and Eucharist
To those who could not travel to the Church.
Especially those of Greek descent.

Stephen demonstrated great wonders and signs
and was a well known evangelist among the people.
He preached the Gospel
And occasionally was drawn into impassioned
Argument with the Temple Officers.

One such group of Jews elders and scribes
with whom Stephen had debated
reacted to Stephen's preaching with violence
Seized him, arrested him and
Brought him before the Sanhedron charging
That Stephen's statements about Moses and the Jews
Constituted blasphemy.

Stephen had angered the Sanhedron with his open comments
About what he called the "cult of sacrifice" in the Temple.
Stephen saw the temple as an idol
and accused the temple officers and elders
of being idolaters akin to Aaron and the Golden Calf
at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

At his trial,
 Stephen gave an impassioned summary
 of the history of the Jews:

From Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
 The salvation brought by Joseph
 Through the enslavement
 The leadership of Moses
 The exodus from Egypt
 The theophany at Sinai and the 10 Commandments
 The golden calf and the rebellion

Stephen concluded his discourse with his own accusation of the
 Jews;

“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears
 Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost
 As your fathers did, so do ye.
 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?
 And they have slain them
 which shewed before of the coming of the Just One.
 Of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.
 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels
 and have not kept it.?”

No man escapes his history but
 This did not go over well with the elite of the Temple.
 And Stephen was quickly convicted and sentenced to death by
 stoning.

But as the sentence was announced,
 Stephen being filled with the Holy Ghost
 looked up to Heaven.

And said:

“Behold, I see the heavens opened
and the Son of Man
standing on the right hand of God”.

Stephen was dragged to the outskirts of Jerusalem
and prepared for the sentence to be carried out.

There was no humane means of capital punishment in those days
And stoning, while not as tortuous as some other forms
Was brutal and savage.

The victim was bound with hands behind him
And a hole was dug in the earth
about as deep as the victim’s waist.

He was placed in the hole,
dirt backfilled and the sentence executed
by his accusers.

Who in turn

From a short distance
threw large stones
at the victim until there were no signs of life

Stephen’s accusers

removed their cloaks
and they laid them at the foot of one named Saul,
So as to more effectively stone Stephen to death.

The man then known as Saul, we know as Paul, the Apostle.
But that is another story.

As Stephen was put to death

He was heard to say;
“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Lord, lay not this sin to their charge”.

And so Stephen was murdered for his belief and faith
And became the first Christian Martyr.
But his story does not end there.

It was the law and custom of the times
In order to further humiliate and punish the accused
removing the shattered remains
and gore to a place
where they were devoured by the wild animals
converting them to animal waste.
And preventing any semblance of honorable burial.

So Stephen’s remains were unrecorded for centuries.

However in 415 A.D. Lucian, a priest said
he had a vision in a dream
and could lead to the place of Stephen’s burial.
Stephen’s remains (his relics) were miraculously preserved.
When people went to the location far outside the walls of
Jerusalem

Described by the priest from his dream.
They found a grave
containing the name of Stephen
and his relics were confirmed.

Stephen’s body had been buried a few miles north of Jerusalem
In a place called Caphar Gamala.
Stephen was initially interred in the Church of the Mt. Zion
But in 460,
he was moved to a basilica

built by Eudocia on the site of his martyrdom
outside the gate of the wall of Jerusalem
that soon bore his name; The St Stephen's Gate.

Over the centuries the basilica fell into ruin and was lost
until about 20 years ago
when an excavation relocated it
and a new basilica was built
by the Dominican Brothers on the old foundation.
Stephen serves as the first Martyred saint of the church
But was the first of many many men and women
Who were killed for their unyielding faith in Jesus.

Like Stephen, their lives and their deaths
Give us courage and strength
In our trials
So minor in comparison to theirs.

Thanks be to God
None of us are called
To the extremes such as those of Stephen

Yet Christians in Asia, China, North Korea and muslim countries
Are martyred even today.
We must not forget them.
And we must thank God for our freedom from such oppression
Here in these United States
Every time we walk through those doors
Without a twinge of fear.