

Wenceslas

26 12 10

Gracious Father,
who gave the first martyr Stephen,
grace to pray for those who took up stones against him:
grant that in all our sufferings for the truth,
we may learn to love our enemies,
and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt,
looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us,
Jesus Christ, our mediator and advocate.

My text may be found in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 6 and verse 15: 'And all who sat in the council looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.'

December 26th, the second day of Christmas, Boxing Day, is also the feast of St Stephen. It seems odd to celebrate a martyr on the day after we have just celebrated the birth of the Christ-child. But I guess, here at the beginning of Jesus' life, we already know that by Easter of his 33rd year, he will die a painful death on the cross. That said, there is something beautiful about Stephen, deacon and protomartyr. He is beautiful because as the text says when he stood accused in front of the Sanhedrin, his face seemed to shine with the radiance of an angel. He is beautiful in that when he was on the point of being stoned to death, he was able to pray for those who were killing him.

If Stephen is beautiful, then so too the carol we sing which takes place on the feast of Stephen – ‘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.’

Wenceslas was a real historical figure. He was born in 907 and was murdered at the age of 22 in 929. Duke of Bohemia, not a king, Wenceslas is a martyr like Stephen and the patron saint of the Czech Republic. He was a Christian and tried to rule his land according to Christian principles. He acknowledged the overlordship of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry the Fowler, but his politics and his Christianity were too much for his pagan brother, Boleslav, who had him murdered so he could rule in his brother’s place. Curiously enough, Boleslav had his brother’s remains entombed in the Church of St Vitus in Prague where they became a shrine for devotion and pilgrimage. By 985, Wenceslas was canonised and twenty years later made the patron saint of Bohemia. His feast day is 28th September, the day before St Michael and All Angels.

The Christmas Carol by J M Neale which made St Wenceslas so well known in England sadly is pure fiction, the product of a nineteenth century imagination informed by compassion for the poor and a burning desire for social justice. It is nonetheless a beautiful story of a king who sees a poor old man gathering wood at night in the cold snow and determines, with the help of his page, to bring this desperately poor man food and drink and fuel so that he too can share in the annual celebration of the birth of Christ. It is a sweet story with real drama as the young boy struggles through the snow and the saint advises the lad to step in his footsteps which have compacted the snow and thereby made walking through it that much easier. As a boy myself, I remember being scandalised on first hearing the word 'sod' which in English has another more risqué meaning than that of a clod of earth!

If Stephen and Wenceslas are both beautiful, then surely Victoria Maud Aliénor Caswell is beautiful too especially in the eyes of her mother and father, Isabelle and David. It is wonderful to be here at St Bartholomew's on the day after Christmas Day that we have also come to baptise Victoria for just as Christmas is about birth and new beginnings then so too does baptism mark a new beginning, the start of our lives as Christians.

May the beauty which informs the lives of Stephen and Wenceslas inform all our lives but in particular that of little Victoria.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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H: Sermon 23: Wenceslas

