

Sermon on Saint Stephen's Day

“Good king Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen” was the first Christmas carol I learned to play on the piano; and today some of us commemorate this first witness who laid down his life by testifying his love of Christ to horrified listeners.

While theologians speak of the historical Jesus of Nazareth who trod the earth two millennia ago, let us rather look into the eyes of those who rejoice in Christ, listen to the sound of their music, see the body language in their paintings and fathom their poetry. We have living reminders of Christlikeness among us in many times and places: they bring good tidings merely with their presence. In such witnesses we recognize Him whom they call Immanuel (God with us).

Our encounter with such a witness can serve as a wake-up call to our lethargic spirit that plods along the straight and narrow, musing over some half empty glass. Or it can be a reminder that the living light that emanates from loving eyes shines brighter than the sun's reflection on a pearl. Or it can be a healing hand that saves one from drowning in the mire of one's thoughts. Or it can be a remark that stuns us in a moment when we happen to be vulnerably receptive.

Yes, I use the word vulnerable because to receive Christ we need to be vulnerable, which implies adventurous. Do you know the origin of the word *adventurous*? It means to be on a quest for whatever is to come. The knight errant in the *Tales of King Arthur* was constantly in search of “that which was to come”, whether it was a test of valor, of faith or of adoration. To be vulnerable means to renounce hiding behind a wall of skepticism for fear of forfeiting control.

Here we are today — perhaps in a small community, recollecting the name of one who testified to the Eternal One's reconciliation with humanity, or as some have expressed it: God becoming man so that man can reach out to the divine. Would the martyr Stephen be stoned today if he spoke as he did two-thousand years ago? No, he would be ignored or mocked or told to shut up. In our culture we don't stone people any more; we kill them with silence. But you may today find some disciples who, sparing of speech, deliver good tidings with eyes, hands and feet — eyes for light, hands for touch and feet for direction.

When you next walk to the grocer, you may possibly look a stranger in the eyes and for an instance illuminate with sunshine the fog in his mind and soothe his aching bones with the balm of your thoughts. This is called doing the work of Christ. It needs neither an established belief nor dogmatic approbation, only a compassionate focus, clarity of intent and warmth, as in that carol of Good King Wenceslas.