St Stephen 2021

8.30 am & 11 am

_In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen._

The days between Christmas and New Year can disappear all too easily in something of a blur.

However, I’m not talking about a surfeit of port or too much Christmas pudding, but rather the liturgical days of the Church’s Calendar.

We all know that Good King Wenceslaus looked out from his castle in Bohemia on the Feast Stephen, which we celebrate today, but what about St John the Evangelist and the Holy Innocents whose feast days fall tomorrow and Tuesday?

Rarely, do parish churches attract more than a handful of hardy worshippers to the services of the 26th, 27th and the 28th of December – let alone New Year’s Day, with it’s Feast of Christ’s Circumcision, the first shedding of his blood as the fulfilment of the Old Covenant.
Today, Stephen the first adult Christian martyr, whose name we know, is dragged outside the walls of Jerusalem by a lynch mob and is stoned to death as the Christian-finder-General, Saul of Tarsus, that Pharisee of the Pharisees, looks on triumphant at having rooted out another yet follower in the Way of Jesus of Nazareth.

Tomorrow, we shall spend the day in the company of another prisoner of conscience, St John the Evangelist, held captive on the island penal colony of Patmos.

And on Tuesday, we remember the pitiful slaughter of the Holy Innocents, the young children of Bethlehem, killed because of Herod’s wild and fantastic insecurities.

Now all of this is a very long way from the comfortable, candle-lit glow of a manager full of hay. It is even further away from the annual screening of a Call the Midwife Christmas Special or a festive edition of Strictly Come Dancing!

A babe in Bethlehem, the Prince of Peace, the very Love and Life of God, whose being seems to have brought anything but Love and Life by his coming into our world.

What Stephen and John the Evangelist, the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem – and all of the martyr saints through the ages show us – is that, in the great struggle between life and death, light and darkness, creation and destruction, there is no room for neutrality or standing on the side-lines, and that the cost of Christian discipleship can, for some, be nothing short of ignominy, exclusion or death.
It is into this faith, this struggle of light and darkness, where darkness so often seems to prevail, but where, we know that light will always – in the end – triumph, that we have been baptised and, having been baptised, have been commissioned to proclaim, with St John and St Stephen and the children of Bethlehem in their innocence, that darkness and death and destruction and decay can never overcome the Light and the Life who came into the world in Jesus Christ, the Child in the Manager.

Jesus came and dwelt among us, God’s Life and Light, offering reconciliation and healing to a fractured and broken world, but Life and Light are the very things which the Evil One – and all the powers of darkness – constantly seek to diminish, ridicule, and destroy.

But, thanks be to God, through Jesus, whose very name means ‘The Lord Saves’, the outcome of the great cosmic battle is not in any doubt.

The Christmas story does not end with shepherds in the stable, nor even with the visit of the Magi, nor the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, it continues lived out minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, 365 days every year, in every land, in the real lives of real people who take their baptismal calling seriously – no matter what the cost.

As we prepare to step, ever so tentatively, and oh so anxiously into 2022, may we all take up the challenge of the Gospel of the Prince of Peace, the challenge laid in a manger, by his mother Mary and pinned to a cross on Calvary by Pontius Pilate.
Like Stephen, and John, and like Saul, who would, in God’s own time, go on, with the Apostles, to evangelise the then-known world, think on these things afresh, ponder them in your heart, re-examine your promise to follow, however haltingly, in the Way of The Lord who Saves. By God’s grace, endeavour to live the new life of Resurrection in the Power of the Spirit and try to bring light and life and hope to others.

Amen.