

# St Stephen's Day – Good King Wenceslas

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, Dec 26 2021 at All Saints' Belmont

Keynote Reading: Acts 6.1 – 10

Today is one of observing multiple celebrations – not so well known St Stephens Day, and being associated with King Wenceslas. The first Sunday after Christmas, and for the wider community it's 'Boxing Day' – of shopping for specials, and its holiday!

For our thoughts today I invite you to think about three of the above mentioned aspects – King Wenceslas, St Stephen and our current situation of needs arising from being in a pandemic. It may be you, as I will see connection between the three.

1) *King Wenceslas* has been associated with this day because of the traditional carol with which we began the service.: 'Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen'.

Who was this 'Good King Wenceslas? He was a Christian prince in Bohemia, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (907 to 935). Bohemia is in what is now Czech Republic, east of Germany. The young Wenceslas was subject of court intrigues and murders of his relatives. And his life was ended in being killed by his brother Boleslaus the Cruel. This was not before Wenceslas had gained popularity by his generous acts towards the poor. It was said he would rise each night and with bare feet and a servant and go round God's churches giving alms generously to widows, orphans, and those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty. After being killed his martyrdom was recognised and he became a saint. He was posthumously promoted from Duke to King of Bohemia. Now he is recognised as the patron saint of the Czech Republic and his remains repose in Prague Cathedral.

As it happens I have a connection with 'Good King Wenceslas' as my sister in law is from Czech Republic (and now living in Canada). I asked her what observances there are in her home country. She recalled in her youth it tended to be suppressed by the Communist regime. He was known there as Vaclav the Good [*Vasslav*). It is kept now as a public holiday and has become a celebration of Czech traditions and culture, of traditional baking, drinking beer, cooking, singing and selling wooden puppets. '

Why the recognition in England? This was very much due to the words and music of the carol. While it is from a 13<sup>th</sup> century tune, J M Neale adapted the tune and wrote the words we know in 1853. Wikipedia suggests ' it has become one of the best loved carols ever written, and was even performed by the Beatles.' Then the connection with Boxing Day is a tradition of giving gifts (in boxes) being associated with the day after Christmas.

2) Now to *Stephen*. He likewise was a martyr, the first believer to die. This occurred after he upset the Jewish hierarchy, as we heard in today's reading. The Acts records a long portion of the speech by Stephen to the Jewish council in which he accused them of not accepting Jesus. (Acts 7.57)

There's another aspect about Stephen that connects with our overall theme. Luke in Acts 6 describes the situation that was occurring in the growing Christian church, that there was some dissatisfaction that the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food parcels. So there was a meeting of the membership and this was attended to as well as continuing the important preaching of the word of God. Thus they appointed diakonos – seven deacons, translated servants to do this work of ministry. By then Stephen had shown leadership – as 'a man full of faith, and the Holy Spirit.' And we read on, there's more about him, as 'full of grace and power, he did many great wonders and signs among the people'. What this suggests to me is that the deacons were recognised in doing ministry, and the ministry became more than of menial tasks serving at tables. Thinking to today, this I consider places emphasis on the importance of the church's social ministry to those in need. So then back to the giving – as of Wenceslas, and of Stephen's example. I would further suggest and encourage all members of the church community to have regard for God working through each one. For some it will be by the church's recognition, be it bishop, priest, deacon. This is not the only model of ministry from the early church – think also of the description in the first letter of Peter: 'Come to Christ then, like living stones...let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood'. Then in St Paul's description of life in the early churches of members with varieties of spiritual gifts including service. The implication is God can and will use you – as each is given grace and guidance for God to be there.

This was certainly evidenced in the carolling of our members who last week visited elderly or needy of the congregation. How much it was appreciated. For me also, the meeting again of Helen at Stone Cottage on Chatham Island. To have a time of conversation and then praying a blessing for her was very much the guiding and working of the Holy Spirit. Then also for each of us, of giving – and receiving gifts, how much appreciated, and linking with our theme. I call them SLA's – spontaneous loving actions. At this time where there's separation caused by covid restrictions instead of thinking what is dividing us,

Think what actions of loving kindness can we do for ones separated in the pandemic? How might we build bridges of love and reconciliation?

*In concluding*, may I in the context of today's needs, return to the carol:  
'Therefore gentle folk, be sure, wealth or rank possessing, you who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing.'