

St Stephen, Protomartyr
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2021

Acts 7:51-end
Matthew 10:17-22

Lord Jesus, light of the world, born in David's city of Bethlehem, born like him to be a king, be born in our hearts this Christmastide, be King of our lives today. Amen.

Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, famously preached on Christmas Day 1170 in his cathedral at Canterbury, on the paradox of celebrating Holy Communion at Christmas. He said this: "whenever Mass is said, we re-enact the passion and death of our Lord; and on this Christmas Day we do this in celebration of his birth... At this same time of all the year we celebrate at once the birth of our Lord and his passion and death upon the cross...beloved, as the world sees this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason?"

Who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason? Becket of course was himself destined for martyrdom just four days later, when he was cut down in that same cathedral whilst celebrating the Eucharist. And, of course, he is the patron of this parish.

And what he was getting at in that final Christmas sermon, that text which has passed into history and is quoted all the time by people like me at this time of year, is something really important about the incarnation. Something really important about Christmas. Christmas is the moment where God takes flesh. We heard those words yesterday didn't we: "and the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us." As I think I preached last year, the

Greek word is much more like "pitched his tent" than anything else. The Word became flesh, and pitched his tent where we are. *Wherever* we are. Not just when we are acting jolly on Christmas Day. Or when we are in a good mood, or have had a bit of good luck. *Wherever we are.*

There are four back-to-back feast days straight after Christmas. St John the Evangelist tomorrow, then the Holy Innocents, and then Thomas Becket. But today is the first: St Stephen. Referred to in the tradition as Stephen the proto-martyr. The first martyr. Because his is the first death that Scripture explicitly records as being a death the sake of Christ. For belief in him.

Is it a bit sick of the church to build a calendar in which three of the four days after the wonderful feast of Christmas commemorate deaths? Well yes, if we believe that mourning and rejoicing are incompatible. But remember what Thomas Becket said. We do both at the same time every time we break bread and pour wine. At Christmas the Word is made flesh, comes to where we are; and because the Word is made flesh, the flesh is made holy. God stoops down to us because we are entirely unable to reach up to him. So we don't need to. The Word leaps down from heaven, and gathers us up to be with him. And does it through suffering and death. Remember the Creed: 'Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. And on the third day he rose again.'

We are already pointing towards Easter. Here, on the second day of Christmas we are pointing towards Easter. Because the baby in the manger is pointing towards Easter. And he has pitched his tent where St Stephen is. And that means that St Stephen is pointing towards Easter as well.

And he has pitched his tent where you are. And that means that *you* are pointing towards Easter.

And that means that every Christmas is a moment of rejoicing, even if it is lived out in loneliness or isolation, if it is lived out in grief or dispossession. If it is lived out in martyrdom, like St Stephen, like the Holy Innocents, like Thomas Becket.

A friend of mine posted a grumpy photograph on Facebook on 22 December. It was a photograph of Easter eggs on the shelf of his local supermarket. And it made him very cross. I replied, more tongue in cheek than anything else, that he shouldn't be cross because every day is resurrection day.

But every day *is* resurrection day. Because on Christmas Day God pitches his tent exactly where you are. Not where you are when you are on your best Christmas behaviour, face turned out in jollity to the world. Where you are the next day, and the day after that. Christmas points towards Easter. St Stephen points towards Easter. You point towards Easter. Every day is resurrection day.

Amen.