



Rejoice and Mourn

We all know from 'Good King Wenceslas' that the day after Christmas Day is St. Stephen's Day. The day on which we recall the death of the first Christian martyr. We know it, but we don't usually get to reflect very deeply on the significance of that sequence of days. St. Stephen's Day is not a day, in my experience on which people rush to Church (or even to get up!) This year might be different because St. Stephen's Day falls on a Sunday and although (in the Church of England at least) we're supposed to transfer Stephen and celebrate the first Sunday of Christmas, I think the celebration of Stephen just after Christmas actually gives us a profound opportunity. So we shall be celebrating Stephen on 26 December.

In his wonderful play "Murder in the Cathedral" T.S.Eliot puts a Christmas Day sermon into the mouth of Thomas Becket in which he gives a good deal of space to reflecting on martyrdom. Becket himself was to be martyred just three days later on 29 December.

In the sermon Eliot points out that the birth of our Lord (as well as his Passion) contains both rejoicing and mourning at the same time. We don't like to give thought to mourning at Christmas but the birth of a baby whose sole purpose in living is to die a horrible death is actually deeply distressing is it not? How many other babies will be born during this coming month only to live a short life and die a painful death from malnutrition or violence?

The death of a martyr, says Eliot, is likewise a cause of rejoicing and mourning. We mourn for the death and for the sin that has caused it, but we rejoice that another soul has glorified God by her or his total devotion to the point of death. How many other Christians will be called upon to give their lives this month? How many Christians will be called upon, not to give all, but certainly to suffer emotional or physical pain for their devotion to Christ or to the promotion of his justice?

It is only by faith and by commitment to the way of faith that we can see the opportunity for rejoicing that is present within every tragedy; but by the same token our faith will not let us forget that whenever and whatever we celebrate our joy is always tempered by the injustice and the sin of the world. So it will always be until our Lord brings in his Kingdom of love and peace.

Christmas tells us that the days of injustice and sin are numbered and that the Kingdom is certain. In Advent let us pray for it in the hope that is God's gift to us. Come Lord Jesus!

Michael Camp

**COMMON
GROUND**

In this edition Michael Camp writes our leading article. It also appears in the magazines of Bromley Methodist Church & Bromley URC