

## Thought for the Day

*Thought for the day is based on one of the day's lectionary readings.*

*For the Bible online, go to: <http://bible.oremus.org/>*

*Choose your version (we use NRSV in church)*

*Copy and paste the reference into the search box and the passage will be displayed.*

### **Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> December**

#### **St Stephen's Day**

#### **Acts 7.51-end**

Who today remembers Stephen on the 26<sup>th</sup> December, when we are so used to calling it Boxing Day! But in these days following Christmas Day we have a cornucopia of saints and special dates to celebrate, as we move through the 12 days of the feast of Christmas, which by the way, only started yesterday!

Stephen was the first recorded Christian martyr, as well as the first deacon, but lest this should seem a downer after the joy of Christmas Day, let's look a bit closer.

Stephen was one of 7 deacons appointed by the apostles in the very early days after Pentecost, whose role was to give practical pastoral support to members of the fledgeling church. This would free up the apostles for their main role of teaching and preaching the gospel. Someone needed to do the admin. I must admit I feel slightly wistful about this today as both Canon Mark and myself and indeed our Director of Music have been taking up many admin tasks during the time when other staff have been on furlough, so I look forward to the day when I can hand over some of these concerns to an administrator!

I can see why the apostles didn't want to be distracted from their central calling. However I also think it's very good for us clergy to get our own hands grubby with clearing out drains or weeding, or mowing, or calling the contractors out or whatever it is, and there has been plenty of all that in recent months.

Those 7 deacons began a tradition of ministry which survives today. When a person is first ordained in the church they are ordained deacon, and only after a year as deacon are they then ordained priest, although in some places the role of a permanent deacon survives. All of us, Archbishop and Bishops included, are first and foremost, deacons, and like the word minister, a deacon is a servant.

This fact enshrines Jesus' words to his disciples, 'If I your Lord and Master wash your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' Service of others is at the heart of the gospel. It is how Jesus lived and why he died. If it is not at the heart of our own Christian lives, there must be something wrong somewhere.

This aspect of ordained ministry is recognised each year on Maundy Thursday when the clergy gather around the Bishop in the Cathedral for the Chrism Mass, where we renew our vows of ordination, and that takes place on the day when we also commemorate that act of washing the disciples' feet.

Stephen's death, horrific as it was, formed a pattern of martyrdom as he was said to have died in the way our Lord died; praying for his persecutors. This may well have had a deep effect beyond the grave, as one of the onlookers was Saul of Tarsus, a man zealous in his Jewish faith and determined to suppress the Christian faith. When he later encountered the risen Lord on the road to Damascus in those heart-stopping words 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting' I can well imagine that the image of Stephen being stoned was in his mind's

eye, maybe it had haunted him since that moment, building doubt gradually under the surface and now as the light blinded him, he realised, thunderstruck, that Stephen was right. It would be good to listen to the carol 'Good King Wenceslas' today – the story taking place 'on the feast of Stephen' when the good king went to feed the poor man at his gate, his holiness even melting the snow under his boots so that the servant did not freeze. A story of service, of seeing a need and responding to it. It's a good day to do someone a kindness, a service which they cannot return. Be a deacon, today.

*Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress.  
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may rejoice in your comfort,  
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love  
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*