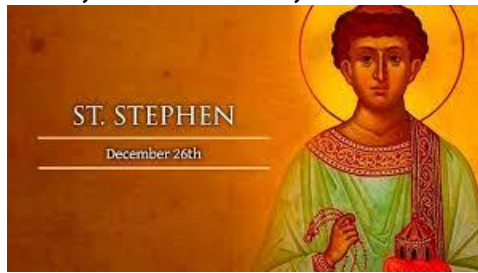


Berrow with Pendock, Eldersfield, Birtsmorton and Hollybush



1st. Sunday of Christmas, The Feast Day of St Stephen, first Martyr

Welcome-do have a candle, glass of juice/wine and cracker/piece of bread ready

HYMN

OPENING PRAYER

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all
and also with you.

**Almighty God,
 to whom all hearts are open,
 all desires known,
 and from whom no secrets are hidden:
 cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
 by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
 that we may perfectly love you,
 and worthily magnify your holy name;
 through Christ our Lord.
 Amen.**

As Stephen rebuked God's people for not listening to the word of God, let us confess our stubbornness and sin which resist the Holy Spirit.

THE CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
 we have sinned against you
 and against our neighbour
 in thought and word and deed,
 through negligence, through weakness,
 through our own deliberate fault.**

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**We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
who died for us, forgive us all that is past
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life to the glory of
your name.**

Amen.

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent,
have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in life eternal;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

THE GLORIA IN EXCELSIS

**Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.**

**Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.**

**For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.**

Amen.

THE COLLECT

Gracious Father,
who gave the first martyr Stephen grace
to pray for those who took up stones against him:
grant that in all our sufferings for the truth

we may learn to love even our enemies
 and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt,
 looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us,
 Jesus Christ, our mediator and advocate,
 who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

READINGS: Act 7:51 to the end, Matthew 10:17-22

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

(Please read Galatians 2:16b-20 at home)

REFLECTION

All men will hate you, you'll be flogged, arrested, put on trial and betrayed by those closest to you. As recruiting slogans go, it's not the most attractive one I've ever heard.....Also how Christmassy is it to go from the baby in the manger to Stephen being stoned to death, the first Christian martyr??? But maybe it's a juxtaposition which we need. Maybe for some, Christianity is just about Christmas, angels, shepherds, wise men, great ahh factor – but what happens when the baby grows up??? Well, to be honest, he turns into a bit of a troublemaker, doesn't he? A bit of a thorn in the flesh of authority. Turning over the tables in the Temple, calling out the corruption of the religious authorities, sitting and eating with women and tax collectors, and surrounding himself with a load of fishermen and other unsavoury characters. No wonder he comes to sticky end.

Stephen is a very faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, because he follows very quickly in his footsteps by speaking truth to power. Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles begins at the very end of a long speech which Stephen gives in front of the Sanhedrin who are trying him for the crime of blasphemy. In his defence he talks passionately about the history of the people of Israel from Abraham through Jacob and Joseph, and then onto Moses and all the problems he had trying to lead his people from slavery in Egypt to the promised land.

For Stephen, the way in which the Israelites treated Moses – moaning, doubting, turning against him, wandering away from God, turning to other Gods – is exactly the same way in which his descendants treated Jesus, the Messiah, the Righteous One.

Trying to hold a mirror up to others and show them the truth about themselves is hardly ever a way of ensuring popularity, and so it proved with Stephen. Enraged at his assertion that he could see the Son of Man standing at God's right hand, the crowd dragged Stephen outside the city walls and stoned him to death, with Saul standing by holding their coats. With his last breath, Stephen beseeched God not to hold this sin against them, an echo of Jesus words from the Cross – Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.

Stephen's death ushered in a period of great persecution against the early church, and scattered its followers to the four winds. It was a time of huge fear, worry and despair for the early Christians.....and yet, and yet.....it seems to me that the very thing that seemed to be going to kill the church was in fact what turned it into a worldwide religion because a few verses later we are told – “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). And we also know that Saul who stood by and approved the killing of Stephen was soon to be transformed by an encounter with the living God to become Paul, apostle and evangelist, whose words still draw people to the faith to this day, and who travelled all over the known world preaching, teaching and spreading the gospel message.

Today we can feel very grateful that we don't face violent persecution, unlike our Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. However, we do face the issue of a diocese in massive and increasing debt which will result in stipendiary clergy being stretched increasingly thin across an increased number of churches; we do face the issue of being marginalised in an increasingly secular world, where people have fallen out of the habit of church attendance and we wrestle with the problem of our pool of fabulous volunteers and officers dwindling and not being replenished as often as we might wish. So maybe we need a Stephen to open our eyes to the truth about where we are as a church and as a benefice, and some metaphorical stones to jolt us out of our post-Covid rut and to crack us open to receive the Holy Spirit to inspire us to do things differently. To see how we too can take the word of God out into our communities, how we can use our beautiful buildings

innovatively to draw new people in and to open our eyes to new possibilities of building contacts and networks via multiple means to enable the rural church not only to survive but to thrive.

The very things which seemed to be about to kill off the early Church were the things which enabled it to grow and thrive. Creativity is often a response to crisis. Sometimes it's only when our backs are against the wall that we are forced to re-imagine our way of doing things, to let go of the old familiar tried and tested and to branch out into the unknown. It's definitely not easy to do, and it can be painful and scary, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can move forward together, firm in our faith, flexible in our thinking, following in the footsteps of Stephen, Paul and all the fathers and mothers of our church. They have given us a firm foundation, let's go out and build a new and exciting way of being church upon it.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Please ask for any additional prayers

**Merciful Father,
accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Gathering our prayers and praises into one, let us pray with confidence as our Saviour taught us.

**Our Father,
which art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done ;
in earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil;
for thine is the kingdom,**

**the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

THE PEACE

Jesus said, 'In the world you face persecution.
But take courage; I have conquered the world.'

The peace of the Lord be always with you
and also with you.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was 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.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.**

THE OFFERTORY PRAYER

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: through your goodness we
have this bread to set before you, which earth has given and human
hands have made.

It will become for us the bread of life.

Blessed be God for ever.

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation,
through your goodness we have this wine to set before you, fruit of the
vine and work of human hands.

It will become for us the cup of salvation.

Blessed be God for ever.

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give thanks and praise.

Here is the table set for a special meal.

All glory and honour be yours always and everywhere,
mighty creator, ever-living God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

For love of us fallen sinners

he most wonderfully and humbly chose to be made human,

and to take our nature upon him,

so that we might be born again by your Spirit

and restored in your image.

The love that brought him down to earth

lifted your martyr Stephen from earth to heaven.

By that love he spoke your word with wisdom and the Spirit;

by that love he saw your glory and Jesus at your right hand;

by that love he overcame the anger of his accusers

and forgave their cruelty;

by that love he committed his spirit into your hands

and won the crown of righteousness.

Therefore with all the angels of heaven

we lift our voices to proclaim the glory of your name

and sing our joyful hymn of praise:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord,
 God of power and might,
 heaven and earth are full of your glory.
 Hosanna in the highest.
 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
 Hosanna in the highest.**

Father of all, we give you thanks for every gift that comes from heaven.

To the darkness Jesus came as your light.
 With signs of faith and words of hope
 he touched untouchables with love
 and washed the guilty clean.

The crowds came out to see your Son,
 yet at the end they turned on him.

On the night he was betrayed
 he came to table with his friends
 to celebrate the freedom of your people.

Jesus blessed you, Father, for the food;
 he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and said:
 This is my body, given for you all.

Jesus then gave thanks for the wine;
 he took the cup, gave it and said:
 This is my blood, shed for you all for the forgiveness of sins.
 Do this in remembrance of me.

Therefore, Father, with this bread and this cup we celebrate the cross
 on which he died to set us free.
 Defying death he rose again and is alive with you to plead for us and all
 the world.

Send your Spirit on us now that by these gifts we may feed on Christ
 with opened eyes and hearts on fire.

May we and all who share this food offer ourselves to live for you
 and be welcomed at your feast in heaven where all creation worships
 you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

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**Blessing and honour and glory and power
be yours for ever and ever. Amen.**

Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.
Therefore let us keep the feast

(consume)

POST COMMUNION PRAYER

Merciful Lord,
we thank you for the signs of your mercy
revealed in birth and death:
save us by the coming of your Son,
and give us joy in honouring Stephen,
first martyr of the new Israel;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

**We thank you, Lord, that you have fed us in this physical and
spiritual sacrament, united us with Christ, and given us a foretaste
of the heavenly banquet prepared for all peoples. Amen.**

HYMN

THE BLESSING

God give you grace to be faithful witnesses,
to see heaven opened
and the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen