

“The Cost of Christmas”

Liturgical Date: St. Stephen, Martyr (December 26)

Primary Text: Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60

Merry Christmas! (let congregation respond) Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Feast of St. Stephen, Martyr, is the Lesson from Acts Chapters 6 and 7. The title of the sermon is “The Cost of Christmas”.

While this is only day 2 of the 12 days of Christmas, if you celebrate Christmas like most Americans do, I imagine that you have opened just about all of your gifts by now. You also likely have attended all of your scheduled Christmas functions. This is the way that the celebration of Christmas, even for most Christians, has evolved in our culture. So, now you may be thinking about the cost of all this gift giving, celebrating, and decorating. If not now, when the credit card statements begin to arrive, you will. You might think, “How did I manage to spend so much money?” A little here, a little there, it all adds up. “Man, Christmas is expensive, I am going to paying for this for a while,” you may be thinking.

There is a big financial cost to Christmas. Here are some of the numbers from the National Retail Federation (NRF). They estimate that Americans will spend about \$850 Billion (yes, that billions with a “B”) on Christmas in 2021. Let’s break that down to an individual level. Numbers from the NRF: The average American spent \$650 on Christmas gifts in 2020 (keep in mind this is per person, not per family). In 2020 we spent \$230 per person on items like food, candy, decorations, and cards. And for anything not covered in those two categories it was another \$117 per person. All totaled, the average American spent \$997 on Christmas. The average

credit card user took on an additional \$1,381 in debt. Wow! There is quite a cost to Christmas!

While there is a financial cost that many feel at Christmas time, I want to speak today of another, and even greater cost. And that is the cost of one's very life. Today is the Feast of St. Stephen. He is the first recorded martyr of the Christian Church, thus our red paraments today. We heard about him in Acts Chapters 6 and 7. For boldly and unapologetically following the one who came born in Bethlehem as the Savior of the world, he paid the ultimate price in being brutally stoned to death. For celebrating and serving Jesus, he paid much more than high credit card bills.

Admittedly, this is a bit of "downer" amongst all the Christmas mirth, is it not? This day is a little bit easier to observe than December 28, which is day for the "Holy Innocents", remembering the slaughter of the male children under 2 in Bethlehem by King Herod. I once filled in for a pastor who was on vacation the Sunday after Christmas and that is the day I got!

In fact, many American Christians don't think much about this feast day. Many churches simply don't observe it. And even in those that do, attendance is notoriously low on the first Sunday after Christmas. It is actually more well-known in Britain and some of the nations of the British Commonwealth. In fact, there is an English Christmas Carol that mentions this day. It is "Good King Wenceslas" (wen-cess-less). He was a Bohemian martyr and the song begins this way, "*Good King Wenceslas, looked out on the Feast of Stephen*". December 26 is a national holiday in the British countries today, known as "Boxing Day." It originally was a day to focused on helping the poor and allowing them rest, but today is more known as the British equivalent of our "Black Friday" with huge sales. So why observe

St. Stephen here, other than the fact that it is on the Church Calendar and that is what we do here at Christ the King?

Because it reminds us that there is a cost to following Jesus. In this the first day after Christmas Day, we see this. Christmas is such a joyous time of celebration. People are happy. It is definitely an “up” time. But in this we can’t forgot about why Jesus came. The reason Jesus came, and His mission does relate to death.

Following Jesus does come with a cost. We must die to self. Our old sinful nature must be drowned, it must die. In the Gospels Jesus speaks often of the cost of following Him. He says “take up your cross and follow me”. He say to “put your hand to the plow and not look back.” He says that our love for God should even exceed our love for our family and that there will be times when non-believing family members will turn believing family members over to the authorities to be persecuted and even killed. I have a little evangelisms book that Ray Comfort wrote years ago called “God Has a Wonderful Plan For Your Life.” (show book) Sounds all wonderful and sweet, doesn’t it? But the cover art that he chose was of Stephen being stoned to death! It gets your attention, and his point is that following Jesus is not easy. It is a call to die. Even if physical death is not required in martyrdom, a dying to our sinful nature and selfish desires is required.

But we heard today, that physical death was required for St. Stephen. He was the first of the New Testament Church, but not the first. Many who have spoken the true word of God have met this fate. Our Old Testament Lesson from 2 Chronicles 24 told us Zechariah being stoned to death and Jesus referenced this in the Gospel Lesson of St. Matthew 23. And note that it is not always pagans killing God’s prophets. More often than not, the persecution comes from the “religious people.” This greatly grieved our

Lord Jesus who said, *“O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!”* And Stephen would not be the last martyr. In fact, Acts 8 tells us that a wave of persecution of the Church began after the killing of Stephen, led by Saul (pre-conversion Paul) who was there consenting to the stoning. And to this day, Christians are being persecuted and martyred in our world. And those that remain faithful even unto death know that the words of Justin Martyr ring true, *“You can kill us, but you cannot do us any real harm.”* The soul of the believer cannot die.

This brings us more specifically to St. Stephen. Before our assigned reading from Acts began, you can read about 7 that were chosen as “deacons” to serve in the Early Church. Stephen was one of these 7. We heard today that St. Stephen had a very powerful ministry. It was so strong that it attracted the attention of the authorities. They trumped up charges and gathered false witnesses (sound familiar?). Essentially, Stephen is charged with blaspheming God, Moses/the Law, and the temple. These charges could carry the penalty of death. He is forcefully brought before the Council.

Keep in mind who this Council was. This is the Sanhedrin: the elders, scribes, and high priest who oversaw legal, civil, and religious matters. Annas and Caiaphas were part of this, and led this Council that had sentenced Jesus to death for supposed blasphemy. This Sanhedrin had been throwing the Apostles in jail. They had great power and an obvious desire to stop the preaching of the Gospel. Before such a body, a lesser man may have folded, but not Stephen.

His face was *“like the face of an angel”* the Scripture says. When asked by the high priest of the charges, *“Are these things so?”*, Stephen launches into a powerful sermon. He goes through Old Testament history. The Hebrews had rejected Moses, thus rejecting God. And this Council had rejected Jesus, and thus rejected God. The preaching of to them of this rejection of the Messiah is where the assigned reading picks back up in verse 51, *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”* The Sanhedrin was not happy. Verse 54, *“When they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.”* But Stephen will not be silenced. He tells them he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The authorities cry out with a loud voice, cover their ears, and rush him. Stephen had not backed down. His cost of following Jesus Christ was his physical life, and he was willing to pay it.

As stone after stone landed upon the body of Stephen, he calls out in verse 59, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”* And in an amazing act of love for those that were killing him, Stephen says in verse 60, *“Lord do not hold this sin against them.”* In this, he is following the example of his Lord and Savior Jesus who also was unjustly condemned by this same Council and also said from the cross, *“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”* And like Jesus, this death would not be the end of the Stephen as he will live forever in heaven. Wow! How powerful is all of this? What an example of boldness, faith, and service St. Stephen is. It would be a shame to “skip over” this because it doesn’t “fit” with the Christmas season.

Furthermore, what did Christ come to do? As the name Jesus means, *“he will save his people from their sins”*. And this, too, would involve suffering and death. We think of that precious and beautiful baby laid in the

manger. Despite tough circumstances, how wonderful the birth of a child is. His mother Mary and earthly father Joseph must have been so proud. We think of our nice little nativity sets. But the story would continue. This child would grow up and face many hardships and challenges. He would be rejected by most of His own people and the death sentence carried out by a pagan occupying power. The sweet baby of those Nativity sets came to die. We cannot, and must not, separate this from our Christmas celebrations.

Jesus died that our sins would be paid for. He died and rose so that we may live. And the gift of Christmas, salvation in the Messiah Jesus Christ, is completely free to us. It is received by grace through faith. Like a Christmas gift given in the right spirit, there is nothing for us to do but receive it. The gift is free to the one that receives it, but it is not free for the one that gives it. As it is with our salvation. The cost of salvation was extremely high to God. No greater price could be paid than the very life-blood of the Son of God Himself. Christmas, God coming to us, as one of us, for us, had a great cost. Whatever sacrifices we would make in following Jesus, even if required-as Stephen was-to give our own physical lives would pale in comparison with such a cost.

While observing the martyrdom of St. Stephen may seem strange to some in the context of this joyous season, we know that it is not unusual at all. Christmas does come with a cost. And not only dollars and cents, but with sacrifices we make in following and serving our Lord. It came with a cost for St. Stephen. It certainly came with a cost to God. And with this cost, He purchased for us the greatest gift that could ever be received. This we celebrate during this season, and all the year long.

Merry Christmas!

Amen.