

**St. Stephen the Martyr**  
Anglican Church · Burnaby, BC · Looking Up, Reaching Out

## **St. Stephen's Patronal Holy Day**

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### **Matthew 22: 34-46**

Today, we are celebrating the Holy Day of St. Stephen. The main day in the church's year to celebrate our patronal saint is December 26<sup>th</sup>, a day after we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the day we know as Boxing Day. Because of this nearness to Christmas and the importance of that celebration, we rarely celebrate this important Holy Day of our patronal saint. Fortunately, the lectionary gives us an alternate date for us to celebrate – August 3<sup>rd</sup>, and so we are honouring St. Stephen the Martyr today, even if it is a day late.

Can any of you tell us anything about St. Stephen?

- A deacon in the early Christian church, a member of a Jewish synagogue for Jewish people who were Greek.
- He became a follower of Jesus. He was said to have performed healing miracles among his people
- He challenged the Jewish Religious authorities in debates and in Acts 7 he gives a long speech to the Sanhedrin, a Council appointed to make judgments on Religious matters, in his address, Stephen states that God cannot be contained in one building – the Temple in Jerusalem – God can be found elsewhere, as well; and, although the Sanhedrin subverted the laws written in the Hebrew Bible, Stephen says that, in fact, Jesus was faithful to the Hebrew Scriptures.
- The Sanhedrin ruled that what Stephen said was blasphemous and they executed him, by stoning him.
- Stephen is the patron saint of Serbia

Who are the persons we call saints, anyway? In fact, we use the term 'saint' in many ways. We mainly know a saint as a person whom the church has canonized through a formal, lengthy process. There are many criteria, which one has to meet if one is to be named a 'saint' by the church. Saints are people who have done something special, which points significantly to God.

You will remember the majestic scene that was presented to us in the Book of Revelations. It conjures up a vast multitude of 144,000 saints, multiplied endlessly. It conjures up the fact that, with all this incredible, astronomical number of people whom we call holy, that when we honour a Saint, it is a tribute to God's mercy, to God's all-inclusiveness; and, when we sing *When All the Saints Come Marching In*, indeed it provokes an inspiring and truly awesome feeling.

The Holy Day of a Saint evokes many observations. Wise ones like this from Sidney Harris: “The saint loves people and uses things. The sinner loves things and uses people.” Or the always quotable Oscar Wilde: “The only difference between a saint and a sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.”

But this morning I would like to forgo the grandeur and the pageantry that the feast of trillions of saints evokes in our minds and I would like to offer a different focus and imagery of the saints: the saints of the past; and, the saints who are present among us. And the imagery I would like you to think about when you think of this Holy Day where we honour a Saint is that of a chorus.

So, close your eyes for a moment, if you wish, and picture yourself standing in a chorus of an endless 144,000 people, singing a song of faith, singing aloud, if you will, the creed, as we will be doing in a few minutes.

That reminds me of the story of the Welsh tenor who died and went to heaven. As he was checking in, he was asked if he had any particular talents he might like to use while in heaven. He, of course said that he was a tenor in a Welsh men’s choir. So, he was sent off to report to the heavenly choir. To his horror, he discovered that although there were 1,000 bass singers and 1,000 baritone singers in the heavenly choir – there was only one tenor – him! So, the conductor, St. Peter, had them sing the first song of the practice – a Welsh Traditional: *Immortal, Invisible, and God Only Wise*. After about five bars of the song, St. Peter taps hard with his baton on the music stand. So, the choir stopped singing and all was very silent – because, when St. Peter summons silence, you listen carefully – he said to the Welsh Tenor, would you please not sing so loud – you are drowning out the rest of the choir!”

So, I ask you to be aware of two things that will be operating as each of us belts out our song, and to seriously and carefully listen to this so as to catch its meaning.

**The first is this: No one believes it all.** No one believes it all. Each of us in the chorus is gifted with only a partial understanding of the mystery of God among us; and so, in our large chorus, one sings with great intensity and assurance; another sings with little attention and conviction. Or perhaps today we are caught by the words and melody because we happen emotionally and spiritually to be in a good place. But, another time, in another mental or emotional place, we feel doubtful and alienated and we can hardly get the words out of our mouths. That is O.K. no one believes it all, but, together, we sing more than we can sing alone. Together we sing more than we can sing alone. That is why a baptism takes place in the midst of the congregation and not later in the day with only the parents, godparents and clergy present. The baptized person is supported in her or his faith journey by the faith-community.

And so the saints, are a chorus, a communion that sings what we cannot; and, believes those parts we cannot accept. They chant the song of faith with us when we can join them and they hum the song of faith when we cannot. Together, we, the saints of yesterday and today, sing more than we can sing alone for no one believes it all, but all believe.

**The second thing that operates is this: if no one believes it all, so also no one believes all the time.** Our journey of faith is seldom smooth and uninterrupted. At times, it

fluctuates between belief and unbelief. For example, think of a mother who has lost her son in an automobile accident. She says that she can no longer believe in God, in a God who would let her son lose his life, especially since she and her family are faithful Anglicans and good churchgoers. How could God do this to her? There are three possible responses to this mother.

**The first is to say**, “Well, if you can no longer believe, you are no longer an Anglican. You no longer belong.” That is a harsh view. That is to deny the seriousness of her loss.

**A second response** is to say to her, “You have not really lost your faith. You are just temporarily depressed. Everything will be fine.” But, not everything will be fine. This is to deny her pain.

**But the third response** is to honour her losses, the loss of her son, the loss, or at least, the shock to her faith. The fact of the matter is that tragedy has indeed broken her trust in a loving, caring God. Meanwhile? Meanwhile, the community believes for her. The saintly chorus picks up her faltering verses. The collective faith of the saints sustains her through her period of unbelief; and as she slowly encounters these saints of yesterday and today, she will begin to see their scars and sense their resilience and they will help her believe once more, in the face of tragic absurdity, in a new and different way. They will help her sing with a different modulation. They will sing louder, the phrases that she can only sing softly, if at all.

**So, you see, no one here – you or I – believes it all. And no one here believes all the time.** No one accepts every verse and no one can sing every note all the time. But the chorus does. The chorus or the community of saints sings when you and I are unwilling or unable to do so.

Peter sang for Doubting Thomas until he could believe again. Thomas sang for Denying Peter until he could embrace again. We are a whole faith-community. We are a chorus of saints. That is what we are celebrating today. We support each other and we become more than the sum total of our individual selves as a community of faith.

You exhibit the gifts I do not have and I exhibit those you do not have.

You cry the tears I cannot cry and I laugh the laughter you cannot laugh.

You believe when I struggle with doubts. I believe when you struggle with doubts.

You smile when I am in tragedy. I grieve when you are in joy.

Our individual pieces are partial. Our faith, our hope, and our love are quite incomplete.

But this Holy Day of Saint Stephen, in which we celebrate all the saints –past, present and future –, tells us something. This Holy Day gives us support. It reminds us of our faith family, that we belong to a vast community of time and space. It becomes a revelation and a comfort. It tells us a mighty truth:

Together we sing more than we sing alone.