

Many people have already moved out of celebrating Christmas and are now busy at the shopping sales or getting ready for the next party. Our liturgy, however, spends the next week celebrating Christmas, as if it is still Christmas day. This special time is called the Octave of Christmas. We also celebrate an Octave for that other important feast, Easter. The reason we have an Octave of Christmas is because the mystery of Christmas is so profound that we need a week to ponder what we celebrated yesterday. In our readings this week, we will hear some more of the Christmas story, but we will also hear other parts of the Bible that will help us to better understand that Christmas is not simply about a baby.

The baby Jesus signals that God is among us. God is not far away, on another planet; rather, God is with us whatever our age or state in life. The point about the birth of a baby is that the baby grows to be an adult. While we know hardly anything about the childhood of Jesus or his early adult life, when he begins his public ministry, he leads people into an experience of God's love. They encounter Jesus as the revelation of God, and that changes people's lives. They come to know that they are loved; they live with confidence despite challenges or even failures. They know where to turn when things are difficult.

What is even more important, and which demonstrates that Jesus was God, is that after his death and resurrection people still encountered him among them, looking after them. This is very clear in the early church, in those years immediately after Jesus had ascended to the Father. That is what we notice today on the feast of St Stephen. Stephen is honoured as the first martyr. The thing that is striking about Stephen is that he proclaimed the message of Jesus with boldness. He encountered opposition, but that only made him more determined to help people understand who Jesus was. As he spoke to the leaders around him, he talked about what God had done in their history and reminded them that throughout that history there were those who disobeyed God, and that some of the religious institutions had become corrupt. He had to be brave to speak like that because the risk was great. But, as we heard on our first reading, he did this because he was filled with the Holy Spirit. In other words, the divine life was in him; the Spirit spoke through him. He was a true son of God.

We call Stephen a martyr. In the early church there were many martyrs, and there have continued to be martyrs throughout history. A martyr in this sense is someone who gives their

life for their faith. They put God before all else. The twentieth century and into the twenty-first century has seen a new wave of martyrs. Many of these are recognised and have become saints. An impressive memorial to some twentieth century martyrs can be found in a series of statues over the outside door of Westminster Abbey in London. But there are also martyrs who have not been canonised, but who, nevertheless, died because of their faith. Often, they died at the hands of people who hated the faith and hated talk about God. Even more disturbing is that in some cases they died while trying to help others, often offering medical care or basic education.

These people, like St Stephen, showed what it means to have faith in God and to be a witness to Jesus, the Son of God. The central point of a martyr is that they are a witness. In fact, all Christians are called to be witnesses. The feast of St Stephen reminds us of this fact. It occurred to me that a reason the church has placed this feast the day after Christmas as part of the Octave of Christmas might be to unsettle us a little. By that I mean that it can be so easy to settle cosily into the scene of the innocence of the baby lying in the manger and to keep a somewhat naïve view of the Christian life, as if it is pure innocence. It can be tempting to be satisfied with the joy and exultation of a newborn baby. Yes, this is important, but as with any baby, there comes a time when the child reaches adulthood and must live in the world with all that that entails.

The message of Jesus in the Gospel is that as we live an adult faith, we are guided and assisted by the Holy Spirit. In other words, we participate in the divine life so that we can participate in the mission of Christ. Jesus' words to the apostles were words of encouragement. We should hear them today as words of encouragement to us. They remind us that this is not the time to say, I can't be a good witness to the gospel of Jesus, or I am not worthy to be his witness. We are not likely to share the same fate as Stephen by being killed for our Christian witness. However, we all share the same fate of Stephen, in that we are filled with the Holy Spirit who helps us to make the ordinary things of life true signs of God's love for the world.