

Sunday 26th December 2021 (St. Stephen the martyr, Boxing Day and Tradition) from Fr. Mike

[Psalm 148](#); [1. Samuel 2.18-20,26](#); [Colossians 3.12-17](#); [Luke 2.41-52](#)

Boxing Day

For many people Boxing Day means only one thing – leftovers! Let’s face it, many people often prepare too much food for Christmas Day and end up eating it for a long time - lots of turkey curry, turkey pies, and the seemingly endless turkey sandwich. In Hungary, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands Boxing Day becomes a second Christmas Day.

Starting in the middle-ages, this was a day when the ‘alms boxes’ (collection boxes for the poor often kept in churches) were traditionally opened and the contents distributed amongst the less fortunate. Some churches still retain this tradition. Boxing Day (nothing to do with the sport of boxing) got its name when Queen Victoria was on the throne in the 1800’s and developed the earlier traditions. The Victorian rich used to box up gifts to give to the poor, and servants would traditionally be granted a day off to go home and give Christmas boxes to their families. Churches also would collect money throughout the year from churchgoers, store it in a box, and hand it out to the poor on this day. This practice has now mostly stopped, although some leave out extra money for paper boys/girls in the Advent weeks and call it a ‘Christmas box’. It may have been the Romans that first brought this collecting

box to us, but they used them to collect money for the betting games played during their winter celebrations. In the Netherlands, some collection boxes were made from 'earthenware' (rough) pottery shaped like pigs – which might be where we get the term 'piggy bank.'

Before World War 2, it was common for working people to travel round their delivery places and collect their 'Christmas box' or tip, although this tradition has mostly died out today.

The feast of Stephen (26th December) the first martyr

The carol 'Good King Wenceslas' (written in 1853) is about a rich king helping the poor, reflecting the popular Victorian view of being charitable at this time of year. Historically, St. Stephen has been associated with charity and giving for a very long time. Saint Stephen is recognised as a saint and the first martyr in Christian theology. He was condemned, being stoned to death for committing blasphemy against the Jewish Temple around the year 36. Stephen is the patron saint of deacons and stonemasons. His final words amounted to a prayer of forgiveness for his attackers (see Acts of the Apostles 7:60) and echo the words of Jesus on the cross. His feast day is observed with both religious and secular traditions in a number of countries.

Why was St Stephen a martyr?

The original meaning of the Greek word *martys* was “witness”; in this sense it is often used in the New Testament. Since the most striking witness that Christians could bear to their faith was to die rather than deny it, the word martyr soon began to be used in reference to one who was not only a witness but specifically a witness unto death. Blood was literally spilled.

St. Luke reminds us this morning (in the famous temple incident with the teenage Jesus) that as followers of Christ we are encouraged to ‘grow in wisdom and stature’ by being serious about our faith in both words and deeds, whatever the outcome, in order to be truly ‘in favour with God and man’ (v.52).

The ‘Turtle Dove’ also features today

‘On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me...’ Two turtle doves (which symbolise the Old and New Testaments).

Its peculiar peaceful and gentle habit is often referred to in Scripture. A pair was offered in sacrifice by Mary at her purification (Luke 2:24). According to Leviticus, the pigeon and the turtle-dove were the only birds permitted to be offered in sacrifice.

The Latin name of this bird (*turtur*) is derived from the distinctive sound it makes, and is a repetition of the Hebrew name ‘tor.’ Of the three species

found in Palestine, it is the migratory turtle dove species to which the various passages of Scripture refer.

The significance for us is that the Old and New exist in harmony. The New Testament did not replace the Old, but rather *developed and fulfilled* it.

All our religious and secular traditions in this season show a development of human interaction and activity, a progression of views, and the ability to adapt so we can ultimately overcome our challenges both as a society and as individuals. For people of faith, the dove continues to be a positive image. In Greek mythology, the birds pulled the chariot of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Chaucer, in his 'Parlement of Foules' mentioned "*The wedded turtledove with her heart true*". Turtle doves weren't just thought of as **devoted, monogamous partners**. These references give the dove special significance in the Christian religion and in the celebration of Christmas. Doves are **symbolic of peace, purity, love and the Holy Spirit**, all important concepts celebrated during the Christmas season. Our perpetual challenge is to continually aspire to this laudable behaviour and ethos, not simply during the twelve days of Christmas, but ideally as faithful witnesses of Christ throughout the rest of the year!

Fr. Mike 26th December 2021.