

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Notes on the Scripture readings for the Christmas Octave

Thursday 26 December

St Stephen, the first martyr

Stephen, “stephanos” in Greek, means “crown” and in the hymns associated with the feast he is called the crown of martyrs.

Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59

The author of Acts devotes a great deal of space to the story of Stephen’s death, much too long to read at Mass. The excerpted reading gives us the motivation for killing him and then moves immediately to his death. The aware bible reader will hear distinct echoes of the death of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. In this way, Luke reminds us that the disciple is not greater than the master.

A disciple is not above the teacher, but every disciple who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. (Luke 6:40)

Jesus was a prophet and suffered for his witness — his calling and his destiny are ours too.

Matthew 10:17-22

This remarkable passage — based on Mark but also in Luke — cannot really come from the historical Jesus but seems to be, instead, a reflection on the experience of the early church. Given the way in which Stephen was inspired by the Spirit, this is a wholly suitable reading for the day.

Friday 27 December

St John, apostle and evangelist.

It is not at all probable that the apostle John was also the author of the Gospel, written under his name. As is well-recognised, that late Gospel is the fruit of long reflection and also stages of redaction, some of the latter at the hands of a later “Johannine School.” The further conflation of the apostle, evangelist and the Beloved Disciple is, likewise, to be resisted.

1 John 1:1-4

The first letter of John, written later in response to a new crisis, does not come from the evangelist but the later school, mentioned above. Our passage is an appeal to tradition (it echoes John 1:1-18) and experience (heard, seen, watched, touched). Given the critical context, the insistence upon joy is noteworthy.

John 20:2-8

We hear a part of a much longer scene in John 20, excerpted to profile the Beloved Disciple. This figure is partly historical (his deaths noted in chapter 21) and partly symbolic (he represents idealised, perfect discipleship and attachment to Jesus). He gets to the tomb first, not because he is fleet of foot but because of fire in his heart. Likewise, although primacy of honour is accorded to Peter, it is the charismatic which counts and therefore “he saw and he believed.” The institution takes you only so far!

Saturday 28 December

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

1 John 1:5-2:2

After the very beautiful first four verses, the letter engages with reality, especially the reality of deluding ourselves about sin. The journey is negative and positive: after darkness comes light; after sin forgiveness. We have our advocate with the Father — here the same word used of the Spirit in the Gospel is applied to Jesus in the letter. The advocacy of Jesus presumes an understanding of his death a little at variance with that in the Gospel proper — in the Gospel the lifting up of Jesus is an unveiling of God and his glory, whereas here it is interpreted in light of Temple sacrifice.

Matthew 2:13-18

The story of the “innocents” is part of the Moses symbolism in the Gospel of Matthew — Moses was also threatened both at birth and later Moses also had to “relocate.” In Matthew’s worldview, the Messiah recapitulates the saving history of Israel, including the Exodus and entry into the land. The note of tragedy (echoing the Babylonian Exile, already alluded to in the genealogy) underscores the tragedy of the human condition and the need for a saviour.