The S. Stephen

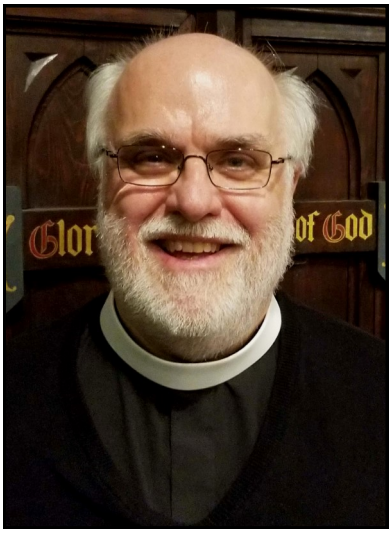
LENT 2019

Vol. 18, No. 3

Stoning of Saint Stephen (1623-1625)
by Anthony Van Dyck. United Kingdom National Trust: on display in drawing room at Tatton Park, Cheshire.

Letter From the Rector

My Dear People,



The Season of Lent approaches and, fittingly enough, this issue of *The S. Stephen* has a theme of martyrdom. (This was not consciously planned; it just happened.)

Part Three in my series "In Search of Saint Stephen" addresses our patron saint's role as Protomartyr, along with several "Excurses" on the history of stoning in the Bible. It's the sort of thing I find interesting; and I hope at least some readers will find it interesting (and possibly even edifying) as well.

Meanwhile, Phoebe Pettingell continues her series on twentieth-century Catholic novels with an excellent piece on Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, the story of an unlikely martyr-priest in the Mexican Revolution in the early part of the last century. This powerful novel would make excellent Lenten reading.

Beginning with Saint Stephen, the Christian martyrs were willing to sacrifice everything for Christ, just as Christ sacrificed everything for us. As training in self-sacrifice, the Season of Lent invites us to undertake "special acts of discipline and self-denial" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 17). Here at S. Stephen's we offer plenteous opportunities to "take something on" for Lent; do please take advantage of them.

Also included in this issue are my Annual Meeting sermon and address. In the latter, I mention the "Way of Love" program underway in the Episcopal Church. On Saturday 16 February, Tom and Cathy Bledsoe joined me in attending the diocesan "Way of Love Kickoff Event." We hope to follow up by exploring how we might participate in this program at S. Stephen's. Stay tuned for details.

Much of the Way of Love material seems based on the multimedia "Rule of Life" Series—developed by the Society of Saint John the Evangelist (SSJE) and Virginia Seminary's Center for the Ministry of Teaching—that was our Lenten program at S. Stephen's last year. The Way of Love promotes the idea of a Rule of Life comprising a set of "spiritual practices" arranged under seven one-word headings: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest.

Bishop Knisely rightly emphasized in his address at the Kickoff Event that none of the spiritual practices commended in the Way of Love are new; instead, they are very ancient. For many decades, our Anglo-Catholic tradition was the *de facto* custodian and proponent of these spiritual disciplines within Anglicanism; well we may rejoice that the wider Church is now (re-) discovering them.

However, I offer one caveat. It became clear to me as we went through the Rule of Life series last year that such practices are only as good as the theology that informs them. The practices are means; theology supplies the ends. Some of the promotional material accompanying the Way of Love program seems to imply, perhaps unintentionally, that the goal is simply to make the world a better place where "love is the way."

The disciplined practice of Christianity can indeed make the world a better place—think of the Epiphany Soup Kitchen here at S. Stephen's—but that's not really the point. The classical Christian spiritual disciplines evolved as means of responding to Christ's offer of eternal salvation, of worshiping God in spirit and truth, of spreading the Good News of God's Kingdom and, not least, of growing in holiness—all in view of a supernatural end that ultimately lies beyond this world and this life. When these practices become instead means of therapeutic self-improvement, community-building, or more

efficient social work, they lose their essential identity and character, even if the outward appearances remain similar. To put it another way, these practices are effective means, but we need to be sure we get the ends right.

With that caveat, I heartily commend what I have seen so far of the Way of Love program; and I look forward eagerly to seeing how we can implement and follow it at S. Stephen's.

With all best wishes and prayers, I remain, faithfully,

Your pastor and priest,

Fr. John D. Alexander

SHROVE TUESDAY PANCAKE SUPPER

An annual Shrove Tuesday (or Mardi Gras) celebration affords an opportunity for a last bit of culinary indulgence before Lent begins! Join us on Tuesday 5 March for our Annual Pancake Supper from 5:30-7 pm. Tickets are available for $5 at the door or at Coffee Hour. Proceeds support our Sunday School and Young People's ministries. And please bring your palms from Palm Sunday to be burnt to make ashes for Ash Wednesday!

ONLINE GIVING FOR S. STEPHEN'S CHURCH

If you would like to make a donation to S. Stephen's Church in thanksgiving for any of our ministries or for any reason at all, we have made doing so online especially easy. Just visit https://www.sstephens.org/donate to give a one-time gift or to set up recurring donations. Running a parish of this size is expensive, and we are appreciative of the generosity of those who have given so much in the past and to those who will give in the future.

QUEEN'S CHAPLAIN TO LEAD SUNDAY LENTEN SERIES

The Sunday evening Lenten Series is an opportunity for food, fellowship, intellectual stimulation, and spiritual edification. Our speaker this year is the Rev. Canon Jeremy Matthew Haselock, Retired Precentor and Vice-Dean of Norwich Cathedral in England, and a Chaplain in the Ecclesiastical Household of Her Majesty the Queen. In this capacity, Canon Haselock regularly preaches before members of the Royal Family at Sunday services in the various "Chapels Royal" in England.

The series begins on Sunday, March 10 at 6 pm with supper in the Great Hall (and continues March 17, 24, 31, and April 7). The format this year is pot-luck; those who attend are asked to bring something to share: such as soup, salad, bread, cheese, etc. Coordinators for each evening are set to enlist volunteers to help set up and clean up.

Canon Haselock's topic is "The Sacrament of Easter: An Introduction to the Liturgy of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter." This exciting five-part lecture and discussion series will be an update on his book *The Sacrament of Easter* (1995), co-authored with Roger Greenacre, which was highly influential in liturgical revision in the Church of England. Our participation in this series promises a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Holy Week and Easter liturgies here at S. Stephen's.

The presentations begin at about 7 pm; each evening will conclude with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the Lady Chapel at 8 pm.

This series is jointly sponsored by S. Stephen's Church in Providence and St. John's, Newport; those who miss a session at S. Stephen's can catch the same presentation the following Wednesday at St. John's at 7 pm.

INTERCESSION

by Nancy Gingrich

Saint Lawrence Liberates Souls from Purgatory (c. 1412)
by Lorenzo di Niccolò. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY.

Many decades ago, a friend of mine would say, "I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way!" Although said in jest at the start of some high-spirited adventure, I find this to be true for life in general. As Christians, we can assuredly say that we know where we are ultimately going. The path here on earth, however, is more circuitous and often a little "dicey."

The Rite I Confession of Sin says it beautifully: "we have sinned against thee in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone…" A teacher of mine once said that over the course of our lives we have either in thought or in action broken every one of the Ten Commandments! Alas, I suspect this is true! We've all privately wished for some awful things.

As we approach and travel through this Lenten Season, we need to take some time to look through our Book of Common Prayer, especially the Confession of Sin. Both the Rite I and Rite II Eucharistic Prayers, as well as the Penitential Orders, include mention of the departed, as well as the Prayers of the People. Rite I is the most explicit: "for all Thy servants departed this life in Thy faith and fear, beseeching Thee to grant them continual growth in Thy love and service."

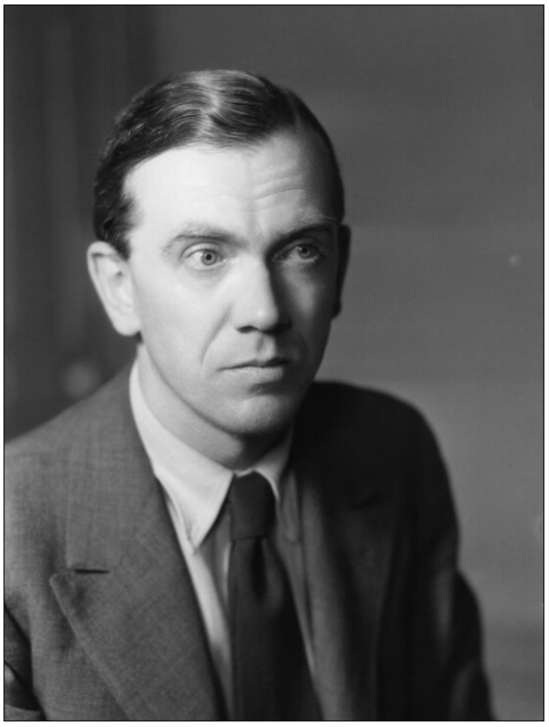
Death is not static. After reading Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Peter Hawkins' related book *Undiscovered Country*, I have come to believe that we have a lot of work to do after we leave this world. We do stand under judgment and must atone for our misdeeds. The journey is hard, but the reward is glorious.

We all know those who have led wonderful Christian lives, but we also know those who have fallen away from their beliefs. All of them need support. Here is where we enter the picture. We are called to pray for all the departed. They are continuing their journey on the other side, and we are to offer intercession for them on their way. I commend Chapter 16 on Prayer and Petition in *Walk in Love* by Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Shobe—the book recently used in video discussion by Father Alexander.

To expand upon our intercession during the Sunday Holy Eucharist, I encourage all to attend the monthly Guild of All Souls, St. Stephen Protomartyr Branch, Requiem Mass where we focus on the departed. We celebrate their lives and intercede for them on their continued journey. We can pray for anyone, not just those who are enrolled in the Guild, or past members of our own church. We all need prayer while here, but also after our earthly departure. As Christians, we do know where we are going, but we need intercession along the way. Let us take time to do this for one another, especially those gone before. Lent is a great time to begin this practice.

THE CATHOLIC LITERARY IMAGINATION: FIVE NOVELS
Part III: *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene
by Phoebe Pettingell

Many readers of English and American literature during the first half of the twentieth century assumed that Catholic writers would be, *ipso facto*, conservative. The Vatican seemed to be opposing Modernist thought; Mussolini became the Fascist dictator of Italy in 1925; by 1939 Franco's fascistic government ran Spain, and Portugal under Salazar was also fascist. In England, centuries of Protestant propaganda demonized Catholicism as a foreign influence attempting to overthrow democratic values (the same was, to a lesser extent, true in the United States until the 1960s, with the election of John F. Kennedy as President, and Vatican II). Catholic writers like Evelyn Waugh, Hilaire Belloc, Ronald Knox, and Roy Campbell were indeed conservative in many of their views, social and political. A notable exception was Graham Greene (1904-1991). Born Henry Graham Greene to a large family of high achievers—his mother was cousin to Robert Louis Stevenson—he nevertheless felt alienated from his culture and rebelled early and often. At Oxford, he briefly joined the Communist Party, but was not really happy in organizations, and soon withdrew. However, he remained a leftist in politics. All his life, he struggled with what today would be called bi-polar disorder. He tended toward the depressive side of the illness, but his manic side gave him the energy to be highly productive, if anti-social. Evelyn Waugh, who was at Oxford at the same time, observed that Greene held himself aloof from most other undergraduates, clearly finding their high-spirited antics frivolous, even childish.



Graham Greene

In 1925, when he was 22, Greene became engaged to the Catholic Vivien Dayrell-Browning. To marry her, he needed to convert. A fervent atheist at the time, he started religious instruction arguing against the existence of God, but found himself outmatched in arguments by the priest, ultimately becoming a believer. The marriage didn't last, despite the birth of two children. Greene fell in love with a married woman, Catherine Walston, who had come to him when she decided to convert. He became her godfather, then her lover in 1946. The following year he left his wife and family, though never divorced, following Catholic teaching. Late in life, he started calling himself a "Catholic agnostic." Like many literary Catholics of the period, he deplored the Mass in modern languages (by this point he was living in Switzerland). In his final years, however, he started attending church again and receiving the sacraments.

Greene published his first novel in 1927, and from then on lived as a writer, penning novels, short stories, essays, and a few plays. He traveled widely all over the world, sometimes as an agent for MI6—the British equivalent of the CIA. His supervisor was Kim Philby, later notorious as a double agent for the USSR, though Greene always argued that Philby might have actually been a triple agent, secretly working for Great Britain after all. This is unlikely, although the kind of quixotic thing one of Greene's protagonists might

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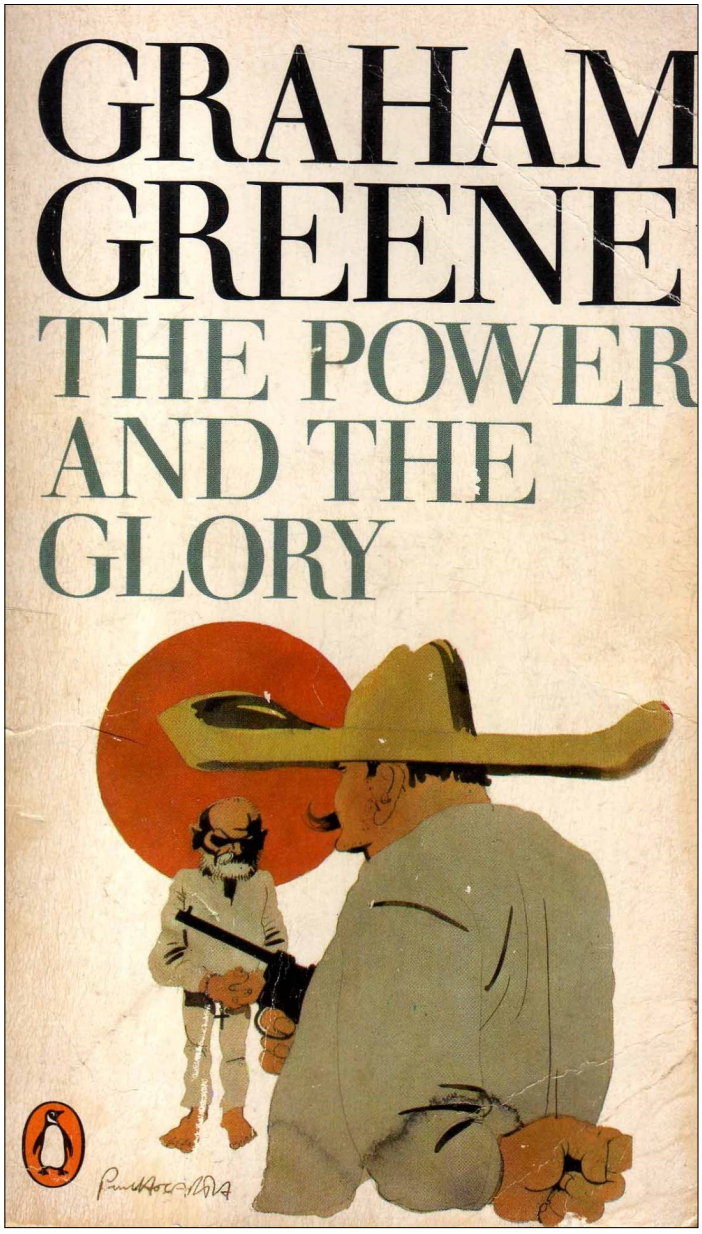
well do. Certainly, Greene's adventures and the people he met provided grist for his novels, which he divided into two categories: literary novels and "entertainments." Many of both sorts remain eminently readable.

Catholic teaching is at the heart of most of Greene's work, and in 1940, he wrote his masterpiece, *The Power and the Glory,* about the persecution of the Church in Mexico. Following the Mexican Revolution (which began in 1910), the Constitution of 1917 outlawed the Church and religion in general, encouraging Trade Unions and Marxism. This reached its zenith in the 1920s where churches were appropriated for garages and storage sheds, and clergy were not allowed to wear clerical garb or speak about politics. In 1926, Pope Pius XI wrote his encyclical, *Iniquis afflictisque,* condemning persecution of the Church in Mexico and the resulting affliction of the faithful. Catholics in the country began their own uprising. They called themselves *Cristeros,* because they saw themselves as fighting for Christ Himself, and their battle cry became *Viva el Cristo Rey*. Many clergy and laymen were killed by the military. Others were captured and executed, still crying out "Long live Christ the King." The government expected that its draconian measures would suppress the rebellion, but this did not happen. Finally, the United States brought pressure on its neighbor to end the conflict. It is estimated that by 1929 approximately 30,000 Cristeros had died, and 56,882 on the government side.



Paperback Cover, Penguin USA.

In *The Lawless Roads* (1939), his nonfiction account of traveling through Mexico in the late 1930s, Greene called the situation in Mexico at that period, the "fiercest persecution of religion anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth [I]." He had wanted to see it firsthand. However, he had another reason for getting out of England. In 1937, he had reviewed a Shirley Temple movie, criticizing what he perceived as the sexualization of the child actress. Twentieth Century Fox sued the magazine that ran the piece, spelling its demise when the movie giant won. Greene's time in Mexico kept him away from the drama he had provoked. The sour tone of the book comes not merely from his outrage over the war being waged on his Church. He loathed the aridity of much of the country, the heat everywhere, and he found the indigenous people sullen and servile. But these same scenes and people so negatively described become very different in *The Power and the Glory*, where the protagonist—a priest trying to fulfill his obligations in a state where the persecution is at its worst (Tabasco, though it is never named in the novel)—learns compassion from the peasants who are "poor in spirit" as he prepares for martyrdom. Despite Greene's leftist leanings, his depiction

of a religionless Socialist state is devastating: no worker's paradise but a corrupt, brutal, and hopeless world of oppression.

The novel begins with an American dentist going to meet the local delivery boat to pick up a canister of ether. There he encounters a shabby man who can speak English, whom he invites to his house to wait before the ship leaves. The man is evasive about his profession, but just as he is about to return to the dock, a boy arrives asking for a doctor for his dying mother. Although reluctant, the shabby man accompanies the boy, losing his chance of boarding the boat and escaping. He is, of course, the last priest in the state. He has stayed on, but as the persecution has intensified, he has decided to go to Mexico City where clergy are now tolerated so long as they don't advertise their identity. His sense of duty keeps preventing him from deserting his flock, however, although it becomes increasingly difficult to say Mass. One by one, his chalice, crucifix, even the sacramental wine, become impossible to carry around. He loses his money, keeps trading his clothes for disguises, and often has no way to eat. He considers himself a "whisky priest," because in his suffering he has become an alcoholic, tippling cheap brandy. A brief lapse from clerical celibacy with his former housekeeper has resulted in an illegitimate daughter. He can hardly pray anymore, but still feels a compulsion to hear confessions and celebrate the mysteries of the mass. Placing God on the tongue of his congregations remains real to him.

He is afraid of death and pain, and knows that if he stays he will, sooner or later, be caught and executed. The local police lieutenant, an anti-religious fanatic, is hunting for him, while the reward for his capture is an incentive to the poor. When he meets a man, known only as the *mestizo*—ugly, servile, with incisors like fangs—he knows he is in the presence of Judas, although the man keeps accusing him of uncharity. At the story's beginning, the dentist remembers as a child picking a clay mold of teeth out of the trash, being fascinated, and thus determining his future career: "The hot wet riverport and the vultures lay in the waste-paper basket, and he picked them out. We should be thankful we cannot see the horrors and degradations lying around our childhood, in cupboards and bookshelves, everywhere." In one of his essays, Greene writes: "In the childhood of Judas, Christ was betrayed." Original sin is deeply ingrained in our nature; it is our natural behavior according to Catholic theology. Only God's grace can make us good, by understanding what he calls us to do.

At one point, the whisky priest returns to the town of his former parish. He hears confessions in secret (for which he receives a pittance of money), and says Mass. He also meets his daughter for the first time. She is ugly and corrupt, mistreated for being a priest's bastard. However, he feels a deep love welling within him for this child of his flesh, and he asks God to damn him in exchange for saving her. He knows he should love everyone the way he loves her, yet feels it is not in his nature. Nor can he feel remorse for the act that begot her, since it opened his heart to care so deeply for another human being. "In his innocence, he had felt no love for anyone; now in his corruption he had learnt…" The moral decay in his daughter is contrasted with another little girl he encounters—the daughter of an English banana plantation owner and his hypochondriac wife—who hides him from the police and whose patient goodness attempts to hold together her parents' dysfunctional lives. Later, this child appears to him in a vision or dream on the night before his execution. We discover that she has died, and becomes in some sense his good angel.

Although the whisky priest increasingly feels his sinfulness, the reader comes to realize that his humility really is a form of remorse and a purging of his failings. He believes he should not be a martyr because the Church deserves better: someone who lives up to his vows, bravely facing death. But in Greene's view, it is our humanity and our suffering that makes us worthy of the heavenly banquet, not the fact that we have never sinned. Again and again, the priest hears confessions from the pious

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that really express smug satisfaction with what they perceive as their own goodness. But rather than contempt, he feels a greater obligation to struggle for their souls: "When you visualized a man or woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity—that was the quality God's image carried with it. When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of the imagination." When one of these women lashes out at him, blaming his behavior for causing unbelievers to mock "real religion," he acknowledges the truth of what she says.

The climax comes when the *mestizo* finally betrays the whisky priest, who has been captured before without the police recognizing who he is. He and the lieutenant have a long conversation about their different faiths. The lieutenant, who is in many ways a good man, hates the Church which he feels—not without reason—has often abused the poor. He wants to purify Mexico but, as the priest points out, "at the end of a gun." And the cleric argues:

> God *is* love. I don't say the heart doesn't feel a taste of it, but what a taste. The smallest glass of love mixed with a pint pot of ditchwater. We wouldn't recognize *that* love. It might even look like hate. It would be enough to scare us—God's love. It set fire to a bush in the desert, didn't it, and smashed open graves and set the dead walking in the dark. Oh, a man like me would run a mile to get away if he felt that love around.

He is about to meet God's love as a martyr before the firing squad. The baffled lieutenant can't understand such beliefs, yet at some level realizes his own emptiness. The priest's martyrdom precipitates a conversion, as well as the advent of another priest to take his place.

Although *The Power and the Glory* was immediately recognized as a great novel, the Vatican initially condemned it, believing that the moral failings of the priest would only confirm anti-Catholic prejudice. But in 1965, Pope Paul VI told Greene, "Some aspects of your books are certain to offend some Catholics, but you should pay no attention to that." In the twenty-first century, it has as much to say to the Church as it did when first written, since its understanding of Christianity's hard truths remain a corrective not only to superficial piety, but also to the notion that by our own efforts we can overcome the world's evil, which lies deep within our fallen selves.

Mexican Martyrs of 1915-1937. Canonized by Pope St. John Paul II in 2000. Feast Day May 21.

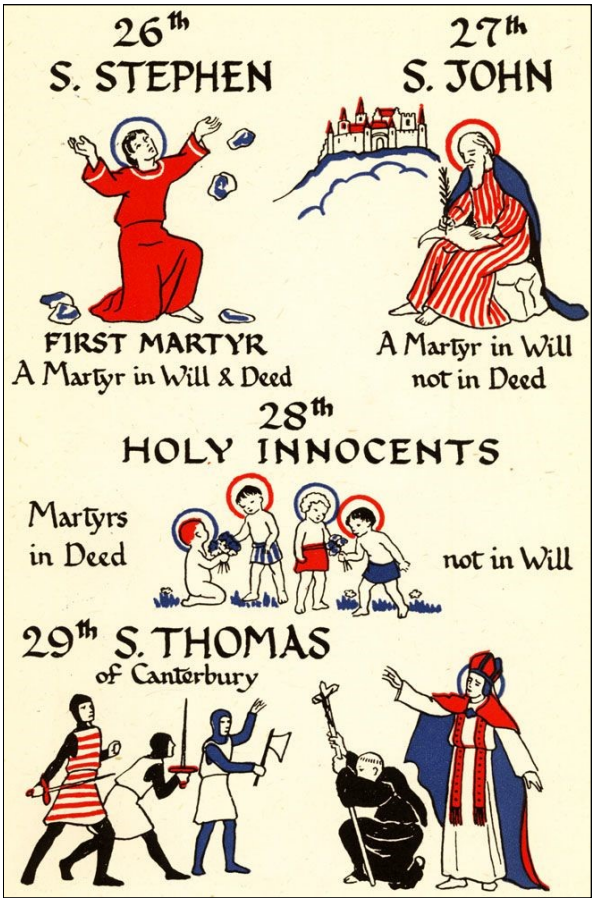
ECUMENICAL STATIONS OF THE CROSS

This Lent, the Episcopal Ministry at Brown and RISD (EMBR) is teaming up with the Brown-RISD Catholic Community (BRCC) to offer Stations of the Cross on Fridays at 6 pm (March 8, 15, 22, 29; April 5, 12). Parishioners and members of the wider community are welcome and invited to attend. If you have never participated in Stations of the Cross, this is a wonderful opportunity to experience this moving devotion.

IN SEARCH OF SAINT STEPHEN
Part III: The Protomartyr
by Fr. John D. Alexander

The title Protomartyr, "first martyr," applies to Saint Stephen in two senses. He is chronologically the first. And he is prototypical: his witness unto death establishes the pattern followed by innumerable others down through the centuries.

But weren't the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, massacred by King Herod, really the first to die for Christ? An illustration by Enid Chadwick in her wonderful *My Book of the Church's Year* (1957) addresses this question. In the three days following Christmas, we commemorate Saint Stephen, Saint John, and the Holy Innocents. Saint John (the only one of the Twelve Apostles to live to old age and die a natural death) was a martyr in will but not in deed; the Holy Innocents, martyrs in deed but not in will. Stephen, then, is the Protomartyr in the sense that he is the first to die for Christ both in will and in deed.



From Enid Chadwick, My Book of the Church's Year. *London: Mowbray, 1957. Downloaded from anglicanhistory.org*

The account of Stephen's condemnation, death, and burial in Acts 7:54-8:2 is brief enough to quote in full here:

> Now when [the members of the Sanhedrin] heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against [Stephen]. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting to his death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him.

This rich passage unites the two meanings of the Greek word *martyr*: a witness, and one who suffers violent death for the faith. Stephen has been arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish Council, where he has given his defense against the charges against him. His witness enrages his listeners. Death by stoning is the punishment for blasphemy, and Stephen's declaration

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that he sees *"the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"* (7:56) may seem the blasphemous last straw. Or, perhaps the Sanhedrin sees Stephen – who has performed *"great wonders and signs among the people"* (6:8) – as a false prophet of the sort described in Deuteronomy 13:

> If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, "Let us go after other gods," which you have not known, "and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. … But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God … (13:1-3, 5)

The account in Acts emphasizes that Christian martyrdom is made possible only by the Holy Spirit. Throughout the story so far, Saint Luke has repeatedly stressed that Stephen is *"full of grace and power"* (6:8), and *"full of the Holy Spirit"* (6:4, 6:10, 7:55). At the beginning of his speech, his face is *"like the face of an angel"* (6:15). Speaking the truth to power as Stephen does, and then uttering his dying prayer that God will forgive his executioners, goes well beyond unaided human capabilities. Stephen's witness unto death exemplifies the Holy Spirit's transforming power in his life.

Early Christian literature takes up this theme in a big way. Legends of the early Church martyrs describe in grisly detail the horrendous tortures they underwent: mutilation; dismemberment; being boiled, grilled on gridirons, flayed alive. It is sickening reading, and one often finds oneself recoiling from what seems a gratuitous pornography of violence. It helps to remember, however, that the premise of these early hagiographies is that human beings do not undergo such tortures willingly. To cave in and recant to save one's life would be the most natural thing in the world to do. The detailed descriptions of torment thus highlight the wonder of the martyrs' steadfastness and perseverance. Not only their bravery in confessing the faith in the face of agonizing death, but also their meekness and forgiveness of their executioners – even their cheerfulness and good humor – bear witness to the supernatural power of Christ at work in them.

Stoning of Saint Stephen (1863) *by Gabriel J. Thomas. Tympanum relief, Eglise Saint Etienne du Mont, Paris, France.*

Luke is also demonstrating that Stephen's martyrdom recapitulates the death of Christ. The master furnishes the pattern for the disciple. Stephen's death is an *imitatio Christi*, an imitation of Christ. The numerous parallels between Christ's death and Stephen's, noted by many New Testament commentators, are summarized in the table below.

Putting Stephen to death was ultimately self-defeating for those seeking to stamp out the new Christian movement. The stoning of Stephen is the first move in a *"great persecution"* (8:1), which scatters the disciples *"throughout the region of Judea and Samaria"* where they continue to preach the Gospel and make new converts. Moreover, this passage introduces the young man Saul, who guards the garments of *"the witnesses"* casting the first stones (7:58), and who approves of Stephen's death (8:1). Saul later encounters the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and becomes Saint Paul the Apostle, who will preach the Gospel and found churches throughout the Mediterranean world. Some commentators have vastly overblown the supposed effects of Stephen's death as planting the psychological seeds of Saul's subsequent conversion. Nonetheless, Saul's presence highlights the utter futility of the Sanhedrin's attempt to suppress the Gospel by stoning Stephen.

The North African Christian Apologist Tertullian (155-240) famously wrote: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Following the pattern of Christ, Stephen sets the pattern for the martyrs who come after him. In this sense, above all, he is the Protomartyr. He teaches us to bear faithful witness to Christ no matter what the cost, not least by forgiving those who persecute us.

PARALLELS BETWEEN CHRIST'S PASSION AND STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

Jesus is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:54, 66-71)	Stephen is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:12-15)
"False witnesses" testify against Jesus (Matthew 26:59; Mark 14:56)	"False witnesses" testify against Stephen (Acts 6:13)
Jesus testifies: "But from now on the Son of man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." (Luke 22:69)	Stephen testifies: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:56)
Jesus is taken outside the city to be crucified (Luke 23:32)	Stephen is taken outside the city to be stoned (Acts 7:58)
Jesus cries, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46)	Stephen prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59)
Disposition of clothing: The soldiers cast lots to divide Jesus' garments (Luke 23:34)	Disposition of clothing: "The witnesses" lay their garments at Saul's feet (Acts 7:58)
Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)	Stephen cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60)
Jesus is buried by Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 20:50-53)	Stephen is buried by "devout men" (Acts 8:2)
Women bewail and lament Jesus (Luke 23:27); the multitudes return home "beating their breasts" (23:48)	The devout men who bury Stephen make "great lamentation" over him (Acts 8:2)

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Excursus I: A Brief History of Stoning in the Old Testament

A number of verses in the Torah prescribe death by stoning for specific crimes: touching Mount Sinai when the Lord is upon its summit (Exodus 19:12-13); sacrificing children to the Canaanite deity Molech (Leviticus 20:1-3); being a wizard or a medium (Leviticus 20:27); blaspheming (Leviticus 24:16); violating the Sabbath (Numbers 13:32-36); enticing fellow Israelites to serve other gods (Deuteronomy 13:6-11); worshiping and serving other gods (Deuteronomy 17:2-6); disobeying parents (Deuteronomy 21:18-21); being found by one's husband not to be a virgin on one's wedding night (Deuteronomy 22:13-21); committing adultery (Deuteronomy 22:22-24); and raping a betrothed virgin in the open country (Deuteronomy 22:25-27).

Stoning of Achan (c. 1896-1902)
by James Tissot. Gouache on board.
Jewish Museum, New York.

The first recorded incidences of actual stoning occur during the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. In Leviticus 24:10-23, an unnamed *"son of an Israelite mother"* and an Egyptian father blasphemes the Name of the Lord. God instructs Moses to have the man brought out of the camp and stoned to death by the whole congregation. In Numbers 15:32-36, a man caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath receives the same punishment, again at God's command through Moses.

The next occurrence takes place during the Conquest of Canaan and is recounted in Chapter 7 of the Book of Joshua. After the destruction of Jericho, the hitherto invincible Israelites start losing battles. It is revealed by lot that a man named Achan, of the Tribe of Judah, has stolen and kept for himself some of the spoils of Jericho – a fine mantel, 200 pieces of silver, and a bar of gold – which were to be completely destroyed and thus "devoted" to the Lord. When Achan confesses his sin, he is taken to the Valley of Achor and stoned to death by all Israel with all his family and livestock, and the stolen items are burned. Then the Lord turns *"from his burning anger"* and the Israelites start winning their battles again.

These stories suggest that biblical stoning was a form of expiation by which the Israelites were to repudiate sins committed by individuals in their midst, thus removing the guilt that attached to them collectively. The Book of Deuteronomy repeatedly concludes commands to put transgressors to death with words such as, *"so you shall purge the evil from your midst"* (17:7, 17:12, 19:19, 21:21, 22:21). In two instances, also, the text emphasizes the punishment's deterrent value: *"and all Israel shall hear, and fear, and never again do any such wickedness as this among you"* (Deuteronomy 13:11, 21:21). Chapter 20 of Leviticus emphasizes the blood-guilt of the victims and the innocence of the executioners: *"they [wizards or mediums] shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them"* (Leviticus 20:27; cf. 20:11, 12, 13, 16).

Stoning is by its nature a collective activity; no-one can usually say that he threw the stone that inflict-

ed the death-blow. Moreover, those who throw the stones need not come into physical contact with their victim; an intriguing verse in Exodus suggests a ritual significance to this degree of separation: *"whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death; no hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot …"* (19:12-13).

Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery (1653)
by Nicolas Poussin. Louvre, Paris, France.

The Book of Deuteronomy emphasizes the necessity of establishing the transgressor's guilt by the evidence of at least two or three witnesses: *"a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness"* (17:6). Moreover, these same witnesses are to cast the first stones: *"The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people"* (17:7; cf. Leviticus 24:14, Deuteronomy 13:9). These verses illuminate the role of the witnesses at the stoning of Stephen who laid their garments at the feet of the young man Saul (Acts 7:58). However, Jesus stands this requirement on its head by his declaration concerning the woman taken in adultery, *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her"* (John 8:7).

Later in Old Testament history, stoning becomes more an act of rebellion and lawlessness than of justice and righteousness. Upon the death of King Solomon, the ten northern tribes stone to death Adoram, King Rehoboam's taskmaster over forced labor, as the first step in breaking away from the southern Kingdom of Judah to form the northern Kingdom of Israel (I Kings 12:17-19). Later, when King Ahab of Israel covets Naboth the Jezreelite's vineyard, the wicked Queen Jezebel brings false charges against Naboth of cursing God and the king. Naboth is taken outside his city and stoned to death; Ahab then takes possession of the vineyard—a crime for which both Ahab and Jezebel later pay with their lives (1 Kings 21).

A final recorded incident of death by stoning takes place as Jerusalem is about to fall to the armies of Babylon in 587 BC. The Spirit of the Lord takes possession of Zechariah, son of the high priest Jehoiada, and he prophesies that the nation has brought this disaster upon itself by its sins: *"Thus says God, 'Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you'"* (2 Chronicles 24:20). At the command of King Joash, Zechariah is stoned to death in the Temple courts. Dying, he declares, *"May the Lord see and avenge"* (2 Chronicles 24:22).

This episode supplies the background to Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees as inheriting the guilt of *"all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar … O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate"* (Matthew 23:37-38). In the New Testament, then, stoning is firmly identified as the fate of righteous prophets. Where stoning had once been a means of expiation of sin, it now compounds the corporate guilt that leads to such disasters as the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, first by the Babylonians (586 BC) and later by the Romans (70 AD).

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All this history sets the scene for Stephen the Protomartyr, who places himself squarely in the tradition of prophets unjustly stoned when he concludes his speech to the Sanhedrin: *"Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered …"* (Acts 7:52). In explicit contrast to Zechariah's *"May the Lord see and avenge,"* however, the dying Stephen prays God's forgiveness upon his murderers: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

Excursus II:
Was the Stoning of Stephen Legal?

A question that has exercised many commentators on Acts is whether the stoning of Stephen was undertaken by the Sanhedrin within its legal authority, or whether it was, in effect, an extrajudicial act of mob violence—a lynching. The question is complicated.

Did the Sanhedrin have the legal authority to sentence a transgressor of the Jewish Law to death by stoning? The evidence is mixed. A verse from the Passion Narrative in Saint John's Gospel suggests not: *"The Jews said to [Pilate], 'It is not lawful for us to put any man to death.'"* Rabbinic tradition similarly maintains that Jewish courts lost their power to administer the death penalty sometime after the Romans assumed direct administrative control of Judea in 6 AD. A standard interpretation of the episode of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3-11) is that the scribes and Pharisees are attempting to trap Jesus into choosing between violation of the Torah, which commands stoning such a woman, and disobedience to Roman law, which prohibits it.

On the other hand, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus records that signs in the outer court of the Jerusalem Temple warned that any Gentiles who passed into the inner courts would be put to death. Archeologists discovered one of these signs, written in Greek, in 1871. We do not really know, however, if the Temple authorities had the legal authority to follow through on such a threat themselves.

One suggestion is that the stoning of Stephen took place during an interim period between the tenures of Roman Prefects, so that the Sanhedrin had more of a free hand to administer Old Testament justice than was usually the case. Josephus writes that something like this happened to James the Just, "the Brother of the Lord," and first Christian bishop of Jerusalem. According to Josephus, when the Roman Prefect Porcius Festus died in 62 AD, the High Priest Ananus assembled a Sanhedrin, accused James of violating the Jewish Law, and had him stoned to death. (In later versions of the story, James is thrown off the pinnacle of the Temple and clubbed to death.) This execution so offended the leading citizens of Jerusalem that, on arriving in the city, the new Prefect Albinus immediately had Ananus removed from office. While the stoning of Stephen would have taken place around 25 years earlier, it may have followed a similar pattern—possibly during the period immediately following Pontius Pilate's departure from Judea to return to Rome in 36 AD.

Excursus III:
Did God Really Command Stoning?

Death by stoning is brutal, barbaric, and cruel. It persists as a form of mob violence even today in a number of countries where a disproportionate number of its victims are women. It is rightly condemned as a serious human rights violation.

An unavoidable question for Christians is whether God could really have commanded such an inhuman practice, as the Old Testament repeatedly attests that he did. Some of the "new atheists" such as Sam Harris have suggested that Christians who accept the authority of Scripture cannot avoid the conclusion that their God prescribed stoning as a means of execution, and that the contemporary practitioners of "honor killings" in places like Iran and Pakistan can cite a biblical warrant for their actions.

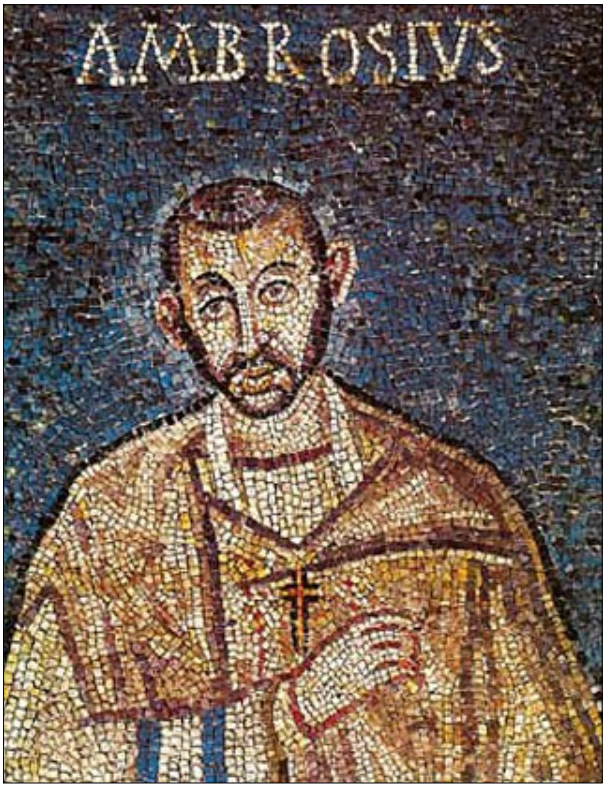
Two mutually opposed and overly simplistic solutions immediately present themselves. On one hand, some biblical literalists assert that human beings are in no position to second-guess God's commands, which are *ipso facto* right and good. (One of my seminary classmates actually took this position with respect to the divinely mandated massacres in the Old Testament.) While this position honors biblical authority, it fails to honor our innate revulsion against such cruelty—a revulsion rooted in human conscience, which in turn discerns the natural moral law given by God in creation.

The opposite approach, typical of much contemporary liberal Christianity, is simply to dismiss those biblical commands and laws that we today find offensive or uncongenial. According to this approach, we should accept as authoritative only those passages and stories of Scripture that we find liberating, life-giving, and loving. Such an approach is, however, hopelessly subjective, effectively substituting the authority of our own contemporary sensibilities for that of Scripture. It fails to honor the Sacred Text as standing objectively over and against us, challenging us to re-examine ourselves and our cultural values in the light of its teaching.

Some Christian commentators point out that death by stoning belongs to the Old Testament's civic law, part of the "old dispensation" superseded by Christ's new law of love. In this understanding, Jesus' response to the accusers of the woman taken in adultery, *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her"* (John 8:7), effectively puts an end to stoning as a licit form of capital punishment. Rabbinic Judaism takes a similar approach, pointing out that many civic laws of the Torah – specifically those regulating the death penalty – ceased to be operational after the Romans imposed direct rule on Judea in 6 AD.

But this approach only pushes the problem further back in history, since the same God worshiped in contemporary Christianity and Judaism is on record has having commanded stoning in the ancient past. (To assert that the God of the Old Testament is other than the God of the New Testament is to fall prey to the Marcionite heresy, condemned by the Church in the second century.)

Another response made by some Christian apologists to criticisms by the new atheists is that ancient law codes often prescribed brutal penalties that could be mitigated or set aside in practice by paying a fine or offering a sacrifice that would serve as "ransom" or "redemption" for the offender. The purpose of the prescribed penalty was often more to emphasize rhetorically the heinousness of the crime than to specify the actual punishment to be carried out in all cases. In the Gospel infancy narratives, for example, Joseph would have been well within his rights to have had Mary stoned for adultery (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), but instead *"being a just man, and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly"* (Matthew 1:19). While interesting, such speculations are little comfort for those biblical figures who actually were stoned to death, culminating with Saint Stephen himself.



Detail of mosaic of Saint Ambrose *in Basilica of Saint Ambrose, Milan, Italy. Possibly dates from or shortly after the saint's lifetime (337-397).*

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Philo of Alexandria *by Frère André Thévet. Engraving in* True Portraits and Lives of Illustrious Men (1584).

It helps to understand that the problem is not new. As early as the fourth century, Church fathers such as Saint Augustine of Hippo wrestled with the problem of "deeds unworthy of God" in the Hebrew Scriptures. Augustine hesitated to become a Christian until he learned from Saint Ambrose of Milan the "allegorical method" of biblical interpretation. Associated with the Christian School of Alexandria in Egypt, this method went back to the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC—c. 50 AD). An allegorical interpretation might suggest that the Old Testament stoning of sinners symbolizes the efforts to which individuals must go to obliterate sin in their inner lives. The allegorical method thus internalizes outward violent actions in the context of an inward spiritual struggle. In a similar vein, Saint John Cassian (360-435) writes that the stoning of the man caught gathering wood on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36) symbolizes eternal punishment: "Thus, from then on, whoever was tempted to [disobey God] would know that at the future judgment he would receive the same condemnation as the others, even if in this life his punishment was deferred."

Not everyone in Christian antiquity was comfortable with Alexandria's allegorical approach. The rival School of Antioch – represented by such fourth-century figures as Saint John Chrysostom – argued that unrestrained use of the allegorical method risked making Scripture mean whatever we want it to mean. The Antiochene Fathers instead deployed the principle of "divine accommodation." That is, the infinite and incomprehensible God accommodates himself to the finite capacities and limited understandings of the human beings to whom he reveals himself. An accommodationist interpretation might suggest that since God knew that he was dealing with primitive nomadic people who were going to stone offenders anyway, it made sense to regulate the practice in law, limiting it to the most extreme cases, so as to highlight the sins to avoid. As the people's level of civilization advanced, the laws regulating stoning would gradually become obsolete, having served their purpose in harsher and rougher times.

The Old Testament's prescriptions of stoning stand as a foremost example of the "deeds unworthy of God" with which early Christian biblical interpreters wrestled. It is above my pay grade to offer a final and definitive solution to the problem. Possible approaches include (in modern times) biblical literalism and liberal reductionism, and (in ancient times) Alexandria's allegoricism and Antioch's accommodationism. Whatever approach we find attractive, however, I would argue for always holding in tension *both* our respect for biblical authority *and* our revulsion at certain things the Bible commands. Christian faithfulness requires us to hold fast to both sides of that equation, jettisoning neither one for the sake of the other, and resisting the temptation to try to resolve the tension between them prematurely.

Mosaic of Saint John Chrysostom, c. 11th century. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey.

Quodlibet

by James Busby

quodlibet (kwäd'lə bet') n [ME fr. ML quodlibetum, fr. L quodlibet, fr. qui who, what + libet it pleases, fr. libere to please] 1. a piece of music combining several different melodies, usually popular tunes, in counterpoint and often a light-hearted, humorous manner - Merriam Webster

Alleluia we deserve not here to chant for evermore;
Alleluia our transgressions Make us for a while give o'er;
For the holy time is coming Bidding us our sins deplore.
trans. John Mason Neale (1852)

The hymnal 1940 Companion tells us the liturgy of the medieval church forbade use of "Alleluia" from the Saturday before Septuagesima (nine weeks before Easter) until Easter. There arose in many local rites a more or less elaborate ceremony of bidding farewell to "Alleluia" including in the fifteenth century burying the word in manuscript in a coffin and singing a full Requiem Mass for it.

Nico Muhly

The choral music on the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday is of more than slim interest. The offertory, Gibbon's "See see, the word is Incarnate" traces in text by Dr. Goodman, Dean of Rochester, the life of Christ, from birth to his anticipated resurrection. Solo voices led by high male voice with early baroque flourishes proclaim the narrative with the full chorus commenting on the proceedings.

The Mass ordinary that Sunday deserves mention as well. *Bright Mass with Canons* is a 2006 work of Nico Muhly (b. 1981), written for St. Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, New York where Muhly is a congregant. This winter his opera *Marnie*, based on the Hitchcock movie, received its Metropolitan Opera premiere to high acclaim. Nico started as a choir boy at Grace Church, Providence, where his musical life was informed by the Tudor composers as well as the long lines of Herbert Howells. John Scott (1956 - 2015), late Choirmaster and Organist of St. Thomas Church, writes of the Mass, "The organ writing is very colorful and very brilliant, and what is so attractive to me is that he is using ancient techniques…Canon, where voices imitate each other and sing the same music but not at the same time, came to its fruition among early-sixteenth-century Flemish composers. Nico Muhly is in a sense coming from there, but it is dressed up in a very contemporary musical language that has aspects of minimalism."

I'm thrilled to be joined that Sunday by organist Leo Abbott, Emeritus Music Director of Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Boston, and an old friend. Leo was a boy soprano at Archdiocesan Choir School at St. Paul's Church, Cambridge, MA, while I was in High School, and we met as students of the same piano and organ teachers Julius Chaloff and George Faxon, respectively. I remember Leo as a hard-working, focused student while I diversified, and I'm so happy he's able to join us in this challenging work.

I bring to your attention two other events of musical interest.

On Sunday 10 March, at 4 pm, Blue Heron will present another concert in their Providence series, and this would promise to be an excellent musical prelude to the Lenten series in the Great Hall later that day. Ticket information is available at www.blueheron.org.

I'm so pleased that Katelyn Emerson will play in recital on the Robert Hale Ives Goddard Organ, Friday 22 March, at 7 pm. I had first heard Katelyn some few years when she was Associate Organist at The Church of the Advent, Boston, and was busy

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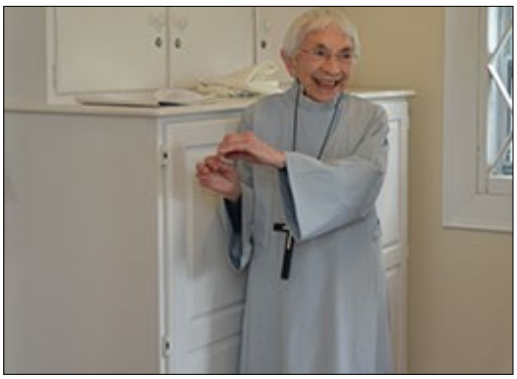
Leo Abbott



Sr. Carolyn Darr, SSM

ing herself winning competitions on three continents, including First Place in the American Guild of Organists Young Artist competition in 2016, as well as being awarded the prestigious J. William Fulbright Study Grant. Now pursuing a graduate degree in Germany, she is being presented and sponsored by the Rhode Island chapter of The American Guild of Organists and I am altogether happy to be allowed to host her performance in Providence. Details are elsewhere in this issue.

It is with sadness in closing I note the passing of Sister Carolyn Darr, SSM (December 29, 1929 - February 8, 2019). Sister Carolyn served as Superior of the Society of Saint Margaret (2002-2011), as well as their chief musician. She was elected 27th President of the Association of Anglican Musicians and was an occasional visitor at rehearsal of our *Schola* on Sunday mornings. Cory MacLean offers a short reminiscence of one of Sister's visits:

> I had the privilege of meeting Sister Carolyn first in the music room at S. Stephen's. She was sitting at James's desk, so I knew right off she was someone special. She was tiny and quiet as a church mouse, but she was nonetheless very present. I'm sure she registered every vocal mistake made and appreciated that which we did well.
>
> We came to know each other better over the last two years. I am honored to sing with the Sisters on occasion, and I fondly remember Sister Carolyn sitting at the sweet little organ in the new chapel there, being amazed by how skilled she was and how much she enjoyed it.
>
> She was warm and funny, always welcoming, and always appreciative. She also had a look in her eye that let you know she didn't miss a thing. I admired her tenacity and strength, which sometimes probably manifested as stubbornness. I am grateful for the time, albeit brief, that we spent together making music. I will miss her. *Requiescat in pace.*

Faithfully, James

LENTEN QUIET DAY

Saturday 23 March, 9 am - 2 pm
Meditations by the Rev. Carlos de la Torre

A Quiet Day is like a mini-retreat without going away. The program begins with Morning Prayer and Mass at 9 am and concludes with tea at 2 pm. In between we have coffee, lunch, and three addresses interspersed with periods of silent reflection and prayer: the perfect opportunity for deepening Lenten devotion and preparing spiritually for Holy Week and Easter.

Fr. Carlos de la Torre is Curate at Christ Church, and Director of Saint Hilda's House, New Haven, CT. He will soon be taking up his new call as Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, Bellefonte, in central Pennsylvania.

ANNUAL MEETING SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 27 January 2019

by Fr. John D. Alexander

Luke 4:14-21

"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

(Just to let you know, this sermon will constitute Part One of my Annual Meeting Rector's Report, and I'll give Part Two during the Annual Meeting itself.)

Back in the 1950s, the linguistic philosopher John Austin coined the term "performative utterance." At that time, the dominant school of logical positivism maintained that any meaningful human speech is purely descriptive, so that it either conforms to reality in a demonstrably verifiable way, in which case it's true, or it does not, in which case it's false. For example, the statement "John has three apples" is either true or false, depending on whether it corresponds accurately to the reality it purports to describe.

Austin's contribution was to point out that certain types of speech are not merely descriptive but performative: that is, they don't merely describe existing realities; they actually bring new realities into being. Of course, we need to be careful. One sign of either delusional thinking or unscrupulous manipulation is the idea that merely saying something makes it true. But still, there are some forms of speech where merely saying something really does make it true: "I christen this ship the Queen Elizabeth;" "This meeting is now adjourned;" "This court is now in session;" "I sentence you to three years in prison." In these instances, the spoken words become deeds bringing into being the realities they describe.

As Catholic Christians, we know all about performative speech. We profess faith in a God whom the Bible describes as creating the world by speaking: *"Let there be light.' And there was light."* Jesus, the incarnate Word, performs many of his mighty works in the Gospels simply by speaking: *"Your sins are forgiven." "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk."* And even today, in the Church's sacraments, the spoken word brings into being new spiritual realities and new worlds of meaning: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "This is my Body, which is given for you … This is my Blood, which is shed for you …" "I absolve you of all your sins."

Today's Gospel sets forth a wonderful example of performative speech. Having returned to his hometown for the first time since his fame has begun to spread, Jesus is invited to read and comment on the Scriptures during worship in the synagogue. This privilege could be extended to any Jewish adult male, so it was fitting for the synagogue elders to honor Jesus in this way. The reader would first read the Torah passage appointed for the day, and then he'd read a second passage of his own choosing from the Prophets to complement the Torah reading. Finally, he'd offer a brief spoken commentary relating the two readings to each other and to the congregation's life.

Luke doesn't tell us what the appointed Torah passage was, but he does recount Jesus opening the scroll, and finding and reading verses from the Prophet Isaiah describing the servant of the Lord anointed by the Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed, the year of the Lord's favor. After Jesus hands the scroll back to the attendant, all present fix their eyes upon him waiting to hear what comment he will make. He sits and announces to the congregation, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

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His meaning is straightforward. Jesus is identifying himself as the one anointed by the Spirit in Isaiah's prophecy. He's the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, whom Isaiah was foretelling. In the Greek, his words read literally, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears." The dynamic interaction of his speaking and his listeners' hearing creates a whole new world of possibilities. He's inviting the congregation to receive the forgiveness, healing, enlightenment and liberation that he's come to offer. Simultaneously, he's calling them to join in proclaiming the good news of the year of the Lord's favor so that they can in turn help bring this forgiveness, healing, enlightenment, and liberation to their neighbors and the world.

Notice that his focus is on the present. God has done great things in the past, to be sure, and God will do even greater things in the future. The Scriptures throughout attest to both. But Our Lord's emphasis in the synagogue of Nazareth is on what God is doing here and now, in the congregation's very midst. *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

This interpretation of today's Gospel has at least three implications for our life together as a parish.

First, we need to be mindful of the power of speech to build up or tear down. Negative talk, grumbling and complaining, is destructive and demoralizing. Positive talk, words of appreciation and blessing, is creative and life-giving. The point is that such speech is often performative utterance; or, one might say, self-fulfilling prophecy: it helps bring into being the realities it describes. Talking down the parish will help bring it down; talking up the parish will help lift it up. Counselors and therapists often point out that in addition to identifying and naming what's going wrong with our lives and relationships, it's even more important to be able to identify and name what's going well, for that gives us a positive foundation on which to build in hope for the future. So, the practical question is how we can learn to accentuate the positive in ways that benefit one another and our community.

Second, God wants us to focus on the present. When I arrived at S. Stephen's eighteen-and-a-half years ago, I encountered a good deal of anxiety about the parish's future, combined with what sometimes seemed an unhealthy nostalgia for a bygone golden age. Some took it as only a matter of time before an all-devouring, omnivorous University would gobble up this church and turn it into a library or a lecture hall. From time to time, I still hear lamentations for the good old days, when the church was packed, and the Sunday school was thriving with dozens of children, and the Sisters of the Holy Nativity were leading the Altar Guild. But I think it's safe to say that if Jesus were here, he would tell us to let go of both nostalgia for the past and anxiety for the future, and to concentrate instead on the opportunities of the present. As Saint Paul puts it in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, *"Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."*

And third, the most important question we can ever ask about our parish is not what we're doing or failing to do, but rather what *God* is doing. This way of thinking is admittedly unfamiliar and perhaps a bit difficult, but it's crucial. It requires prayer and discernment. It begins with identifying, proclaiming, and celebrating the ways in which God is blessing us here and now, today. How is God fulfilling the Scriptures in our hearing? For what do we want to give thanks to God in our life together as a parish? And I will pick up from that point in my Rector's address to the Annual Meeting later on this morning.

ANNUNCIATION TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Monday 25 March, 6 pm
Sung Mass in the Lady Chapel
Preacher: the Rev. Canon Jeremy Haselock

ANNUAL MEETING ADDRESS
Sunday 27 January 2019
by Fr. John D. Alexander

As I mentioned, my sermon at Mass constituted the first part of this Annual Meeting address. So, here goes with Part Two. (The good news is that it's already half over.)

I concluded the sermon with the question: For what in our life together as a parish do we want to give thanks to God? For my part, I want to take this opportunity to enumerate some of the things that I'm thankful for as your Rector.

(Incidentally, one of my mentors, the Rev. Dr. Richard Cornish Martin, SSC, taught me this technique. Back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he convened annual gatherings of Anglo-Catholic rectors, and he got so sick of hearing them whining and bellyaching about everything that was wrong with their parishes and the Church at large that he instituted the practice of beginning each meeting by going around the room, and having us introduce ourselves and tell the group what we were thankful for in our lives and ministries. It was an enormously salutary practice that helped set a healthy and positive tone for our gatherings.)

First of all, then, I give thanks to God for our liturgy and music. It's an incomparable privilege to work with James Busby in planning out the liturgical year and our musical offerings; and a delight to preside at worship featuring such a first-rate choir as the Schola Cantorum: certainly, the best church choir in Rhode Island and one of the best in New England. Not to mention the ad hoc groupings of instrumental musicians that go under the heading of St. Dunstan's Consort. I could not feel more blessed.

Second, I thank God for a terrific parish staff, comprising Susan Rozzero, Jacob Ihnen, John McGlashan, and Diamond Centofanti. During the past year, we've broken some new barriers in our use of communications technology. We continue to send out a weekly parish e-newsletter to keep everyone up to speed on what's going on; and it attracts a good amount of positive feedback and appreciative comment.

During the Summer and Fall, I conducted an online book discussion group involving seven or eight people that took place by videoconference at 7 pm on Sunday evenings: a first for me and for S. Stephen's. This use of videoconferencing enabled individuals to participate who for a variety of reasons would have been unable to come to the church for an in-person gathering. We're about to get another one going to read and discuss C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, which looks light it might take place at 8 pm on Sunday evenings. If you're interested, there's still time to sign up; just shoot me an email.

For the first time ever, also, this past Fall we instituted an online Stewardship program, offering parishioners the opportunity both to make their pledges, and to set up their pledge payments, through the parish website, in addition to the old-fashioned way of filling out a hard-copy pledge form. I'm glad to report that 61 per cent of the pledges received for 2019 came in electronically.

Third, I'm thankful to God for this parish's superb lay leadership: especially that of Tom Bledsoe, Senior Warden. As of this Annual Meeting, Nancy Gingrich is going off the Vestry, and George Ryan and Phoebe Pettingell are stepping down from their respective positions as Treasurer and Clerk. They've all done a wonderful job. And I'm really excited with the new team, including Alison Huff as Junior Warden, Muriel Jobbers as Treasurer, Molly Bledsoe Ellis as Clerk, and new vestry members Sharon Lloyd Clark and Leana Latimer Hooks.

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I'm confident that we have a capable team that can work effectively to guide the parish to meet the opportunities of the coming year, and years.

Also, I cannot adequately express my gratitude for Modu Johnson and Kate Lester who stepped forward in our hour of need to take over our Sunday School program this past September. Thanks to them the children put on a wonderful skit at the Christmas Eve family Mass. Good things are happening in this department.

Fourth, I'm thankful to God for the new members who've begun attending S. Stephen's this past year. When Bishop Knisely made his bi-annual Visitation in February, I asked him during lunch afterwards what techniques he'd found helpful in promoting evangelism and church growth during his years as a parish rector and cathedral dean. Without a moment's hesitation, he answered, "Well, the first thing is to pray." He explained that whenever any of his congregations experienced growth, it was always in response to persistent prayer on his part. So, I took his advice to heart, and started praying every day for God to send new members to S. Stephen's; and lo and behold, by the middle of Lent it started happening! That's a reminder to us all. Prayer for the parish is not just the clergy's responsibility; if we want S. Stephen's to flourish, the first step is for all of us to ask God to make it happen. There will be plenty more to do after that, but that first step is indispensable.

As far as plans for the coming year are concerned, one possibility that I'd like us to consider is the "Way of Love" program currently being promoted by the Episcopal Church under the auspices of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. This program has a curriculum for small groups emphasizing "spiritual practices for a Jesus-centered life" under the seven headings of "Turning, Learning, Praying, Worshiping, Blessing, Going, and Resting." From what little I've seen of the materials, it looks well worth exploring further. A diocesan kick-off event for the Way of Love program is scheduled at Saint Mary's, Portsmouth, on Saturday, February 16, from 8:30 am to 12:30 pm. I'm planning to attend; and I encourage anyone who's interested to do so as well. Then we can decide whether there's sufficient interest to initiate this program at S. Stephen's. Stay tuned for more information.

Fifth, most of all, I thank God for all of you, the parishioners of S. Stephen's. We have an enormous range of gifts and talents in this parish to be used in the Lord's service. I thank God for your loyalty, perseverance, faith, hope, and love. You are a blessing to the Church and to the world. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you all.

ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICES

On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, the Church's liturgy includes the opportunity to receive a cross of ashes on our foreheads as a sign of our commitment to keep the season of Lent—the forty days until Easter—in a spirit of penitence and self-denial marked by practices of "giving something up" and "taking something on." This year's Ash Wednesday schedule (March 6th) is as follows:

9 am - Morning Prayer & Blessing of Ashes
12 pm - Noonday Prayer
5:30 pm - Evening Prayer

7 pm - Solemn Mass
Gregorio Allegri, *Miserere*
Thomas Tallis, *In ieiunio et fletu*

Imposition of Ashes Offered
at all Services


Katelyn Emerson
Solo Organ Recital
Friday, March 22, 2019 at 7:30 p.m.
works by Vivaldi/Bach, Sweelinck, Howells, Franck, Boëly, Parker & Sowerby
hosted by S. Stephen's Episcopal Church, 114 George Street, Providence RI
presented by the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Guild of Organists
Open to the Public ❖ Donations Welcome
Post-Recital Reception Follows
"...a star of the first rank..."
"...one of the world's most promising organists..."
"...impressive technical facility and musicianship..."
"...thrilling from beginning to end..."
www.katelynemerson.com

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