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“Let your face shine upon your servant” (Psalm 31:17).

The martyrdom of Stephen, celebrated on the day after Christmas, pulls us abruptly from the scene of Jesus’ birth to the death of a disciple who forcefully preached the implications of the Gospel Jesus came to proclaim. Stephen, a Jew of the Diaspora living in Jerusalem, was one of seven men chosen as deacons to serve the needs of the Hellenist, or Greek, Jewish converts to the church as distinct from the Palestinian Jewish converts served by the Apostles. Stephen was stoned to death for downplaying the importance of the temple and obedience to the Torah in comparison to salvation through faith in Jesus, ideas St. Paul was later to develop in his letters.

Stephen’s trial parallels the trial of Jesus, who saw the heavens opening to reveal the “Son of Man standing at the right hand of God,” from the Book of Daniel (7:13). Stephen’s equating of Jesus with God enraged the synagogue leaders and the mob as blasphemy. The detail of the executioners laying their cloaks at the feet of Saul during the stoning shows his support and the beginning of his traumatic transition from persecutor to Apostle, called to preach the same message to the Gentile world.

Stephen dies reciting Psalm 31 as Jesus had done from the cross: “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.” In today’s Gospel, Matthew describes the persecution the primitive church met for spreading the Gospel, which divided families and

generations as the followers of Jesus were expelled from the synagogues by their own kin and handed over to the courts and even to death for breaking from traditional beliefs.

Believers will probably need a break from holiday festivities, travel and family gatherings, but we are still called to hold the mystery that has occasioned it all. God is in our midst and the redemptive work of invoking justice and love continues in a troubled world divided between excess and want, indifference and profound suffering. On this feast of Stephen we are reminded that the joy of the Gospel also entails the cost of discipleship.

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