

**Sermon: 2018/12/26 (Saint Stephen's Day) - Jeremiah
26:1-9,12-15; Acts 6:8-7:20, 51c-60; and, Matthew 23:34-39_BTR**

The episode that Luke just described for us (in Acts) is, if you dare picture it, *horrifying*:

an *innocent* young deacon - a charity-worker, in fact, for the Church, employed by them to feed homeless widows in Jerusalem - is dragged through the streets, Black-Hawk Down-style, by a self-righteous mob of his neighbors, who then - like something in Rwanda or Afghanistan - proceed to throw fist-sized rocks at his head to murder him.

Why?!

Why would we celebrate such an appalling thing during this season of "peace on earth and goodwill to all men"?

This scene of *vicious* intolerance seems antithetical - *antagonistic*, even - to the very meaning of this (joyous) festival.

But we mustn't turn away in disgust.

(*Nor* should we demonize Stephen's executioners and those like them.)

No, what *should* excite us is his commitment to the truth of things

- his commitment to the truth of things so long ago:

and how such a commitment - even in the face of thuggishness, of intimidation, of ridicule - has ensured that we "moderns" know that there is something even to commemorate today! - Christmas:

God's birth in Bethlehem as a *perfect* human being - a faithful Jew therefore able to redeem the whole world.

That commitment is a challenge to us in America who don't need worry for our lives for the sake of the Faith; a challenge as to how *we* can *honor* Stephen's death (and not cheapen it).

For in every generation Christians experience the pressure to conform - to renounce the stupendous claims of orthodox religion and the *radical* lifestyle such orthodoxy engenders, and in every generation there are those who succumb, who twist and turn the Church's teaching into something more comfortable, more convenient.

But keeping the first martyr's example *forever* in front of us - if only once a year on this feastday, is a bulwark against that happening here.

So let us then each renew our own commitment, affirming the faith for which Stephen was killed in the words of the Creed....