

Column

For many, Christmas ends on Dec. 25. No sooner than the calendar is turned, the decorations put up at the beginning of November (if not earlier) come down. The boxes are packed away for another year, and that is that.

But, not so fast! The three days that follow have something to teach us. If you look on a church calendar or in some almanacs, you are likely to find attached to them the names: St. Stephen's (Dec. 26), St. John (Dec. 27) and the Holy Innocents (Dec. 28).

The first of the so-called 'Christmas saints' is Stephen. He was one of the first set aside as a deacon in the young church. 'Deacon' means servant, and that is what those chosen for this office did. They attended to the physical needs of the members of the Body of Christ, thus freeing up the Apostles to devote their energies to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-6).

Stephen has also gone down in history as the first Christian martyr. Notably, following the example of his Lord, he died forgiving his murderers.

In Stephen's case, death came not on a cross, but from stones hurled by an angry mob. Mob members would not hear his message concerning Jesus being the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Stephen reminds us that embracing the baby whose birth we have just celebrated can be costly. Some like Stephen have been called to die for Him. Hopefully, we will not be in that number, but one can never know.

The second Christmas saint follows on Dec. 27. On this day the Apostle John is remembered. Jesus called him while he was mending his fishing nets. Later, while hanging on the cross, Jesus would entrust His mother into his care.

John went on to write the fourth Gospel, three Epistles and most likely the last book in the New Testament, the Revelation. In the prologue to his Gospel, John takes the story of Jesus back before His incarnation and birth. "In the beginning was the Word" and "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," John wrote. For this reason, John has been called "the evangelist of the divinity of Christ."

Tradition has it that John, in contrast to Stephen and many other early followers of Jesus, did not die the death of a martyr, but rather lived to a ripe old age. John reminds us that God calls many to *live* for Him.

Which is harder? To get up day after day and put on the boots of a soldier of Christ or to make one great stand for Him and to be welcomed immediately into heaven (as was Stephen)? I must confess I don't know.

On the third day after Christmas, the Church remembers not a single person but the Holy Innocents. These are the children Herod ordered killed in Bethlehem following Jesus' birth. His purpose was to stamp out any rival to his throne.

The Holy Innocents remind us that young children often get in the crossfire of man's malice. Yet, knowing the God who has been revealed in Jesus, we are bold to confess that evil will not have the ultimate say. Those children whom Herod slew will have a place in God's eternal kingdom. None will be left behind or forgotten.

The Holy Innocents further remind us of God's call on our lives to seek justice in the present age for the weak and helpless. This call includes infants and little children. In the words of the child's hymn, "They are precious in his sight."

Christmas [Day] comes once a year, but so do the three special days that follow. May we learn from the ones commemorated on them how to worship the new-born King, not in sentimentality, but in reality and truth.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin; Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen. (Collect for Christmas, Book of Common Prayer)

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