

## Boxing Day and St Stephen

In Acts 6 we read that the Hellenistic Jews complained to the apostles because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. (The Greek name for Greece is Hellas or Hellada.) Hellenistic Jews were Jews who spoke Greek and who had adopted more of the Greek customs and culture than had the Hebraic Jews who spoke Aramaic, a language more closely associated to Hebrew. Many of the Hellenistic Jews had migrated to Jerusalem over the years to be close to the temple, and they had formed their own community, and some of them had become Christians. Because the early Christians had pooled a significant portion of their possessions, they also relied on mutual support and could draw from the pot if needed. Hellenistic widows, because they were more likely to have migrated to Jerusalem with their husbands earlier in life, were often left without familial support structures and thus were reliant on the gracious donations of the Christian community. For some reason, they were being overlooked in the distribution of food, and they were starving.

The apostles, who were quite busy with leading the church in spiritual matters, decided to appoint seven Hellenistic men to ensure that the needy in the Christian community, in particular the Greek-speaking widows, had the care that they required. And, thus, it seems that the office of deacon was born. Deacons were to look after the physical needs of those who did not have resources to support themselves.

Among these early deacons was a man named Stephen. Not only did he have the kind of compassionate heart required of a deacon, but he also was an accomplished speaker. When he was arrested on trumped up charges of blasphemy, Stephen gave a lengthy speech (sermon) in which he accused the Jewish leadership of ignoring God's Word spoken through the apostles just as the leaders of God's people had ignored God's Word spoken through the prophets centuries earlier. He so enraged the Jewish leaders that they took him outside the city and stoned him to death.

The Christian church has long recognized Stephen's commitment to the Lord and his compassion for the poor, and centuries ago established one day every year to recognize him and celebrate his life. St. Stephen's Day is celebrated on December 26, the day after Christmas. St. Stephen's Day became a day when those who were rich blessed the poor with gifts of food, clothing, and money. It was also a day when employers gave their employees a bonus as a way of recognizing their faithful service.

Thus, Boxing Day was born. Although the origin of the word, "boxing," is not certain, it appears that it was called that because alms boxes were placed in churches to collect donations for the poor. Boxing Day, thus, was a time when those who had received gifts on Christmas (the greatest gift being Jesus) blessed others from the blessings they had received. Boxing day became a day for intentional charity.

Scarcely anything of that history remains today, for Boxing Day, recently a holiday used by many to visit family and friends, has become a day when retailers open their stores so that people who have already received gifts can acquire more possessions. Boxing Day has been usurped by the retail world for the sake of profit, and people use the opportunity to buy things for themselves. Rarely, if ever, is Boxing Day thought of as a day when we intentionally give of our blessings so that others can be blessed.

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Boxing Day (now Boxing Week) has become a retail event closing a month-long season that began on Black Friday. Black Friday, an American event which has spilled over into Canada, was developed by retailers to begin the Christmas shopping season. Black Friday falls on the day after American Thanksgiving, a day when people give thanks to God for his provision of physical blessing. Like Boxing Day, Black Friday is also a day when people who are full of God's blessings are urged to acquire a little more for themselves. Similar in nature these two events, Black Friday and Boxing Day reveal the true heart of western culture. We are only too happy to forget the needs of others as we seek more for ourselves. When the economic growth is the mark of a healthy world, we should not be surprised that this has happened.

My mother used to tell how, in Holland, they would attend church on Boxing Day. I have always wondered what the pastor would have to say after having preached two services on Christmas Day (yes, she and her family attended those as well), but I think that I now know. I suspect that the pastor would take the opportunity to prepare a sermon that would encourage the congregation to engage in acts of intentional Christian charity. And, perhaps, he might use the story of Stephen, the committed, compassionate, godly man who gave his life as a martyr as he followed Jesus.

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