One of the minor treasures of the Christmas season is the little sequence of the four saints’ days which immediately follow Christmas Day. Each, of course, has its own significance, but I want to look at them as a sequence, because the sequence itself carries its own spiritual message: they are St Stephen, St John the Evangelist, the Holy Innocents (the children killed on the orders of Herod) and St Thomas Becket.

The first is St Stephen; many of us learned that the Feast of Stephen is Boxing Day when we learned the carol, “Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen”. But what about Stephen himself? There are two things that we need to remember about him: in the Acts of the Apostles we learn that in the early days of the church it was decided that they would be more effective if one group of leaders specifically took responsibility for the care of the sick and the poor, and another group concentrated on the preaching and the teaching. Those with responsibility for care were called deacons, which means those who serve, and Stephen was one of the first group of seven people appointed to do this. So when, in the carol, Wenceslas and his page went out to take food and firewood to the poor man, they were following in the steps of St Stephen. The other thing that stands out about Stephen is that he was the infant Church’s first martyr, the first person to die for the faith. One of the great Christian writers of the first couple of centuries of the Church’s life said that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church – in other words their courage and their example would inspire others to become believers. And a striking example of that is that one of the witnesses of Stephen’s execution was a young man called Saul, later known as Paul. He was a zealous opponent of the Christians at that time, and he was an accomplice at Stephen’s death because we are told in the Acts of the Apostles that he stood by and held the cloaks of those stoning Stephen. But within a short time Paul was converted to the faith, and he became a great leader of the mission to
the non-Jewish world, and some of his letters to the new Churches in key cities of the Mediterranean world became an essential part of what we know as the books of the New Testament.

So the day after we have celebrated Christ’s birth the story of St Stephen reminds us that following him involves concern for the sick and the vulnerable; it reminds us that following him can be costly, because at times of formal or informal persecution men and women have died, and are still dying in our own time, rather than deny him; and it underlines for us that ancient Christian confidence that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

The next day in this little sequence is St John’s Day, on 27th December: that is St John who wrote the fourth of the New Testament gospels. The opening of that Gospel is very much part of our Christmas services, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” We are intended to understand that the Word, in this very special sense, is an expression of God’s very being, “and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us…” That is what we mean when we talk of the *incarnation*; the word incarnation means being made flesh, and the point is that Jesus is not just a good man, but that in his birth God himself came to share our lives, God made flesh and dwelling among us. The contemporary priest and poet, Malcolm Guite, sums this up as “The heart of heaven opened to the earth,” and he invites us to “come close with John, and feel the pulse of love”.

The third of these four saints’ days is Holy Innocents; they are described as innocents because neither they nor their families had any dispute with the authorities; but the tyrant, Herod, alarmed at the prophecy of the birth of a King, wanted to get rid of any potential rival, and he was callous enough to kill all toddlers and babies in and around Bethlehem, just to be sure. One of the memorable images of the brutality of this was painted in the sixteenth century by Pieter Breughel, who set the story as a Flemish atrocity of the sort with which he was all too familiar from the government atrocities in attempts to quell rebellions in the Spanish Netherlands, where he lived; so he depicted the soldiers wearing the Spanish uniforms and armour of his own time. It’s a violent enough scene as we see it now, but art experts have discovered that some of the bundles lying around and farm animals in the villagers’ arms or at their feet were originally representations of slaughtered babies, but they were later painted over for reasons of delicacy, or perhaps because the original painting could itself have provoked reprisals from a brutal regime. Such atrocities didn’t stop with Herod, and they are not restricted
to armies of occupation. Just before Christmas Save the Children drew attention yet again to the way that children are suffering inhuman treatment on frontiers in some places in eastern Europe and in both north and south America, where migration is a politically explosive issue, and the authorities are deliberately inflicting suffering as a means of deterrence. The suffering of innocent children doesn’t have to be inflicted by armed brutality, it can come from economic injustice too. I caught by chance on the radio just before Christmas a poignant song by Edith Piaf, called Christmas on the Streets, which reflects the terrible shortages in Paris just after the end of the second world war. The singer addresses a waif, “Petit bonhomme, où t’en vas-tu?”

Little chap, where are you off to,
Running like that with bare feet?

And the child replies

I’m looking for paradise,
Because it’s Christmas, they say.

And, of course, that little chap never found his paradise, because all the Christmas treats were out of reach behind glass, intended for others more fortunate than he, while he could only press his nose to the windows, and leave shivering and empty-handed. Yes, we now have a welfare state, but blatant inequalities like that didn’t end when wartime shortages were over; economists tell us that the gap between the richest and poorest of our own society is still getting wider. When we hear of such young victims at the same time as we are hearing again the story of Christ’s birth, we are being reminded about the realities of the world that he came to redeem.

I mentioned at the beginning that the first three of these celebrations of the saints go back to the New Testament. The fourth, which fell yesterday, celebrates St Thomas Becket. In a sense he is the odd one out, because he lived over a thousand years after the others that we have been thinking about, but I’m including him because the four fall on successive days straight after Christmas. He too was victim of a king, Henry II, who would not be thwarted, and of the bully-boys who would do anything to get into the king’s good books. But in his case it was complicated by the wider question of the role of the church in politics in those days. Only a few years earlier, he had been a ruthless “fixer” for the King, using fair means or foul to secure the King’s advantage. Becker’s life and death warn us of the moral and spiritual confusions that arise when church leaders get too close to raw political power. The final conflict between him and the King arose in
part when, as Archbishop, he started to defend the Church against the King’s attempts to erode its independence and its wealth. He was killed in his own Cathedral by knights who thought that they were following the King’s wishes.

That conflict long outlived Becket and his King. But in Becket’s case it was his martyrdom which immediately took over and put him centre stage. His murder caught the imagination of people all over Europe: of course they recoiled in fascinated horror from the sacrilege of an Archbishop being murdered on holy ground, in his own cathedral; but perhaps another reason was that the underlying conflict about the boundaries between spiritual and royal power was a sore point all over Europe; the Pope canonised Thomas Becket within three years of his death; devotion to him as a saint spread like wildfire. His cathedral in Canterbury became a major place of pilgrimage, and devotional images of him in glass and stone could be found all over Europe – we have a fourteenth century stained glass image of his murder in this Cathedral, in a window in the Lucy Chapel, just over there.

It was the emotional and spiritual power of his death that moved T. S. Eliot to write these lines in *Murder in the Cathedral*, his verse drama about Thomas’s death:

> For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his blood for the blood of Christ,
> There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from it
> Though armies trample over it, though sightseers come with guide-books looking over it…
> From such ground springs that which forever renews the earth,
> Though it is forever denied.ii

Saint Stephen, Saint John, the Holy Innocents, St Thomas Becket. All in different ways point to the meaning of another phrase from St John, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.” May we, this Christmas time, take to heart those words from St John’s Gospel, and reflect on these saints’ days as part of our continuing celebration of the coming of our saviour. Amen.

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i Malcolm Guite, *Sonnet for the Feast of St John*
ii T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, from the concluding Chorus.