

The humble saints

Well I wonder what the cost of your Christmas has been?

Each year financial services group PNC in Pittsburgh calculate the true cost of Christmas, the true cost that is if you send your true love the gifts from the song the 12 days of Christmas.

In 2019 it cost £29,244.75 to send all the gifts, they skipped last year, but this year it would cost you £30,981, inflation of just under 6%.

A partridge in a pear tree costs £10 more, but it's not the partridge, which is the same price, the tree has gone up.

The nine ladies dancing has only increased by £15 but the ten Lords a leaping increased by £966.

We need to consider the plight of the eight maids a milking. Due to National Minimum wage they only earned £43.61 collectively – that's £5.45 each and the shocking news is that it's only increased 8 pence per maid since 2019.

If you think you can get away and reduce the cost by doing it all over the internet think again. Due to delivery costs of on-line purchases your six geese a-laying and your seven swans a swimming push the total cost up by almost £3,300.

And why are you sending your true love swans – they belong to the Queen.

If you go completely over the top and send the gifts repeatedly, that is, your true love ends up with 12 partridges and an orchard of pear trees, 22 turtle doves, 30 French Hens, 36 calling birds and 40 gold rings etc etc. the whole thing is going to set you back £134,927

There has always been a cost to Christmas.

There was the cost to Mary and Joseph of their reputation. It's clear that Joseph allowed the locals to think Jesus was his son and conceived before wedlock which in that culture would have been a recurring item of gossip and shame.

When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to be presented in the temple, Simeon blessed them both but speaking to Mary he said - "*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*" These words came true as Mary witnessed the crucifixion.

Saint Stephen, whose feast day is today, bore the true cost of Christmas, which is far more than celebrating Jesus birth, it's accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour. As the first Christian Martyr the church wanted to honour him as highly as they could, so they created the feast of Stephen as near to the birth of Jesus as they could and that's today.

Let's briefly recap his story.

After the Ascension the disciples waited in Jerusalem until Pentecost. The en-powerment of the Holy Spirit sent them out to preach and proclaim Jesus Christ and very many people responded; the church grew by 3,000 on Pentecost.

Before the serious persecution really set in (led in part by Saul), this new organisation "the church" had some problems of its own. This is the start of Acts chapter six

**6** *In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews<sup>[a]</sup> among them complained against the Hebraic*

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*Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."*

Stephen was one of those 7 men. I particularly like Stephen, chosen to minister in practical ways and to help the church stay organised and fair, living up to its values of equality and transparency.

Stephen had more about him than a useful chap to get a job done, he was articulate, knowledgeable and ready at a moments notice to speak of his faith interpreting the history of God's people in the light of Jesus Christ. The section of the Psalm we heard read could have been describing Stephen's life.

Through him the Holy Spirit moved very powerfully, and he performed signs and wonders among the people and became the focus for opposition. He was seized and taken before the Sanhedrin.

The whole of Chapter seven of Acts is given over to Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin ending with the reading we had earlier and their response which was to drag him from the city and stone him to death. They couldn't bear the powerful accusation made towards them.

Stephen's story reminds us that the true cost of following Jesus Christ is far more than celebrating his birth each December. You and I are unlikely to give our lives for following Jesus, although that IS the case for Christians elsewhere in the world today. The

true cost of Christmas is a life committed to following Jesus Christ, allowing His Spirit to help us see the needs and intervene.

Like Good King Wenceslas. He was a real person although to be fair he was [Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia](#) (907–935) and is only referred to as king after the Holy Roman Emperor Otto the 1<sup>st</sup> gave him an upgrade after his death.

A committed Christian who cared about the needs of the poor he is quite likely to have made the effort himself to take food and wine and fuel to the poor and to pay the cost. I like that he noticed the poor man, he asked about him, he did something about it himself.

I think Stephen, who organised the food distribution and Wenceslas who provided for the poor would approve of our support this year for the Children's Society, Crisis at Christmas and "Your Sanctuary" – and the start we have made towards a hardship fund. This has been Revd Terry's request that we open a fund as a means to continue supporting those in a time of need. The PCC agreed and on our Carol singing event we collected £270 as a first contribution to the fund.

Many of our best loved carols including the one we shall sing in a moment, pose the question "what are you going to do about it?" The temptation to pack Christmas away for another year is there for everyone.

Shall we pay the true cost of Christmas this year? To pledge our hearts and minds and souls and bodies and truly give ourselves to serving Christ. That is the question.

**Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 26/12/21**