

December 26th – Saint Stephen, First Martyr.

December 27th – Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist.

December 28th – Holy Innocents, Martyrs.

To some – even some regular churchgoers – it may seem odd that the Church’s calendar should jump thirty or so years in a single day, from the birth of Jesus to the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr – that is the first witness to the Lord’s resurrection to die for his faith.

It’s less strange that the next day should celebrate Saint John, whose gospel and epistles speak so clearly of the Word made flesh, even though that means a jump of many more years to John’s death late in the first century.

It’s strange, in another way, that on the third day after the Nativity, the calendar jumps back to the infancy of Jesus and commemorates the infants who were the innocent victims of Herod’s attempt to kill ‘the new-born king’.

These three celebrations have been in the calendar on these days after Christmas at least since the fifth or sixth century, although we do not know why they were fixed in this way.

But – however ignorant we may be about the original reasons for celebrating these saints on the days after Christmas – we can learn an important lesson from these feasts.

The three celebrations suggest three ways of witnessing to Jesus, whose birth, death and resurrection are the heart of the Christian faith. Many of the favourite Christmas hymns and carols link the Nativity and the Passion, for example in “*Christians, awake, salute the happy morn*” we sing: *Trace we the babe, who has redeemed our loss, from his poor manger to his bitter cross.*

Saint Stephen witnesses by preaching Jesus as the Righteous One, who fulfilled God’s plan and was put to death, and by accepting his own death with the name of Jesus on his lips.

Saint John witnesses to Jesus by his reflections on the meaning of the Incarnation, by his writings and by a long life, at the end of which his preaching was reduced to the single sentence “Little children, love one another.”

The Holy Innocents witness to Jesus because they, like him, are victims of injustice, and are caught up in his work of salvation, sharing his victory over death.

The lesson we may learn is that in every human situation it is possible to bear witness to Jesus, whose death perfected his humble birth and his life of obedient service to his Father.

We ask that these saints, gathered with us round the Christmas Crib, may pray for us, that, in life and in death, we too may bear faithful witness to Jesus.