Three-Day Christmas Reality Check

I only heard popular reference to St. Stephen's Day in the Chieftains rendition of "The Wren," a traditional Celtic song sung for the feast day. For centuries, in Ireland, a Wren Hunt would be held on that day resulting in the killing of a wren and then displaying the wren in a decorated globe. The custom is more than likely pre-Christian, dating back many centuries. The custom's connection to St. Stephen is also obscure with some accounts claiming that a wren wakened the guards when St. Stephen was trying to escape, while other legends say that he had a pet wren that was stoned to death along with the saint. Whatever the origin of Wren Day, it is odd, but it does highlight St. Stephen's Day.

Apparently, St. Stephen's Day is a public holiday in almost thirty countries. St. Stephen's feast day is December 26th, the day after Christmas. It is the first of three feast days that lend a dose of reality to the feast of Christmas. December 26th is St. Stephen's Day, the first Christian martyr; December 27th is the feast of St. John the Evangelist, the writer of the fourth and last Gospel; December 28th is the feast of the Holy Innocents, memorializing King Herod's massacre of all Jewish children under the age of two.

There is much to celebrate at Christmas. God's' entry into human history. The definitive word that the divine and the human belong together. The hope that creation may one day be restored to the original goodness of Eden. The bold assertion that a life of self-sacrificing love is the key to human happiness and to the world's redemption. All of this and more is part of the mystery of the Incarnation. The richness of Christmas is evident even in all the non-religious trappings of the season that expound joy and goodwill.

Buying into the Jesus-event has other implications, though, and the three subsequent feast days bring those to mind. St. Stephen's martyrdom tells us that following Jesus may come with a cost. It means following in the way of Bethlehem-born Jesus without counting the cost. The spirit of a martyr causes believers to reassess their lives – their life circumstances, options, plans, values, and estimations of what is worth their effort and investment – all in the light of a relationship with the person born in a stable.

The feast of St. John the Evangelist teaches another lesson. Having found faith in Jesus as so valuable, we are called to share that faith, by word and example pointing the worlds we inhabit to a better way. Faith in Jesus gives us a life orientation that is distinct from many of the things that characterize our culture. It means introducing peace instead of conflict, hope instead of despair, building up rather than tearing down, giving instead of taking.

The feast of the Holy Innocents is a tough one. Undisguised cruelty and horror. This third day after Christmas makes us face the evil that exists in the world. Unfortunately, we do not have to look far to see it; just read the news. The way of Jesus takes on evil in a centuries long fight. The depth of destruction and evil in our world demands an equally profound witness to goodness and grace. As Paul writes, "Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good." (Romans 12:21)

The season of Christmas starts on Christmas Eve and goes until the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. This gives us ample time to celebrate this great feast and to absorb the lessons of the three immediate feast days, all the while gaining strength from what God's entering human history offers us.