**CHRISTMAS DAY**

Lord Jesus Christ, your birth at

Bethleham draws us to kneel in

wonder at heaven touching earth:

accept our heartfelt praise

as we worship you, our Saviour

and our eternal God. Amen.

Almighty God, you have given us

your only begotten Son to take our

nature upon him and as at this time

to be born of a pure virgin: grant

that we, who have been born again

and made your children by adoption

and grace, may daily be renewed by

your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ

our Lord. Amen.

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**26 December**

**Stephen,**

**Deacon,**

**First Martyr**

Gracious Father, who gave the first

martyr Stephen grace to pray for those

who took up stones against him: grant

that in all our sufferings for the truth

we may learn to love even our enemies

and to seek forgiveness for those who

desire our hurt, looking up to heaven

to him who was crucified for us,

Jesus Christ, our mediator and advocate.

Amen.

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**26 December**

**Stephen,**

**Deacon, First Martyr**

In the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen is described as one of the seven deacons whose job it is to care for the widows in the early Church in Jerusalem. His eloquent speech before the Sanhedrin, in which he shows the great sweep of Jewish history as leading to the birth of Jesus, the long-expected Messiah, and his impassioned plea that all might hear the good news of Jesus, leads to his inevitable martyrdom by being stoned to death. The description of Stephen in Acts bears direct parallels to that of Christ in Luke’s gospel: for example, the passion; being filled with the Holy Spirit; seeing the Son of Man at the right hand of God, as Jesus promised he would be; commending his spirit to Jesus, as Jesus commended his to his Father; kneeling as Jesus did in Gethsemane and asking forgiveness for his persecutors. Witnessing to Jesus by acting like Jesus in every way is thus seen by Luke as of the essence of the Christian life.

*Sourced from ‘Exciting Holiness’*

**27 December**

**John**

**Apostle and Evangelist**

Merciful Lord, cast your bright beams

of light upon the Church: that, being

enlightened by the teaching of your

blessed apostle and evangelist Saint John,

we may so walk in the light of your truth

that we may at last attain to the light of

everlasting life; through Jesus Christ your

incarnate Son our Lord. Amen.

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**27 December**

**John**

**Apostle and Evangelist**

Whether or not John the Apostle and John the Evangelist are one and the same, the Church honours on this day the one who proclaims Jesus

as the Word made flesh and who is ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’. John was one of the sons of Zebedee, along with James, who followed Jesus. John was there at the Transfiguration of Jesus on the holy mountain; he was there with Jesus at the last supper; he was there with Jesus in his agony in the garden; he was there with Jesus and his mother, standing at the foot of the cross; he was there with Jesus as a witness of his resurrection and ‘he saw and believed’. John was a witness to the Word, he proclaimed the Word, and he lived and died witnessing to the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, who loved him and whom he loved.

*Sourced from ‘Exciting Holiness’*

**28 December**

**The Holy Innocents**

Heavenly Father, whose children

suffered at the hands of Herod,

though they had done no wrong;

by the sufferings of your Son and

by the innocence of our lives,

frustrate all evil designs and

establish your reign of justice

and peace; through Jesus Christ

our Lord. Amen.

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**28 December**

**The Holy Innocents**

Herod ‘the Great’ was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman authorities in Palestine and he proved to be ruthlessly efficient in his thirty-three years of dealing with his subjects. In Matthew’s gospel, he tried to persuade the Magi, to whom he played the host on their journey seeking the one ‘who has been born king of the Jews’, to bring word of where they had found him. His desire was to eliminate Jesus and, when he realised that the Magi had tricked him and left the country, Herod had killed all the children under the age of two, in and around Bethlehem. These were God’s ‘innocent’ ones, paralleling the story of Pharaoh slaughtering the Hebrew children in Egypt.

*Sourced from ‘Exciting Holiness’*

**29 December**

**Thomas Becket**

**Archbishop of Canterbury,**

**Martyr, 1170**

Lord God, who gave grace to your

servant Thomas Becket to put aside

all earthly fear and be faithful even

to death: grant that we, disregarding

worldly esteem, may fight all wrong,

uphold your rule, and serve you to

our life’s end; through Jesus Christ

our Lord. Amen.

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**29 December**

**Thomas Becket**

**Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr**

Thomas was born in London in 1118, of a family of merchants. After a good education he served as clerk to another burgess then entered the service of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. Thomas proved himself an excellent administrator and skilled diplomat. In 1155 he was appointed Chancellor by Henry II. For several years King and Chancellor worked harmoniously together in mutual admiration and personal friendship. As a result, the King nominated Thomas as Archbishop of Canterbury to succeed Theobald in 1161. From the start there was friction, with Thomas insisting on every privilege of the Church. The conflict worsened until 1164 when Thomas fled to France. Encouraged by the Pope he pursued his arguments from exile, sending letters and pronouncing excommunications. Three efforts at mediation failed before an apparent reconciliation brought him back triumphant to Canterbury in 1170. But the nobility still opposed him, and words of anger at court led four knights to journey to Canterbury where they finally chased Thomas into the cathedral, and murdered him there on this day in 1170. Thomas was undoubtedly a proud and stubborn man, for all his gifts, and his personal austerities as Archbishop were probably an attempt at self-discipline after years of ostentatious luxury. His conflict with Henry stemmed from their equal personal ambitions exacerbated by the increasingly international claims of the papacy, played out in the inevitable tension between Church and State.

*Sourced from ‘Exciting Holiness’*

**1 January**

**The Naming and**

**Circumcision of Jesus**

To us a child is born, to us a Son is

given, and he shall be called the

Prince of Peace.

You shall call his name Jesus for he

will save his people from their sins.

You have done great things, O God,

and holy is your name.

Almighty God, whose blessed Son

was circumcised in obedience to the

law for our sake and given the Name

that is above every name: give us grace

faithfully to bear his Name, to worship

him in the freedom of the Spirit, and to

proclaim him as the Saviour of the world;

who is alive and reigns with you, in the

unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now

and for ever. Amen.

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**1 January**

**The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus**

The celebration of this scriptural festival marks three events: firstly, the naming of the infant Christ as Jesus; secondly, the circumcision as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham ‘and his children for ever’, thus Christ’s keeping of the Law; and thirdly, traditionally the first shedding of the Christ’s blood. The most significant of these in the gospels is the name itself, which means ‘Yahweh saves’ and so is linked to the question asked by Moses of God: ‘What is your name?’ ‘I am who I am,’ was the reply, hence the significance of Jesus’s words: ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ This feast has been observed in the Church since at least the sixth century.

*Sourced from ‘Exciting Holiness’*

 **2 January**

**Basil the Great and**

 **Gregory of Nazianzus**

 **Bishops, Teachers of the Faith**

 **379 and 389**

Lord God, whose servants Basil

and Gregory proclaimed the

mystery of your Word made flesh,

to build up your Church in wisdom

and strength: grant that we may

rejoice in his presence among us,

and so be brought with them to

know the power of your unending

love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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**2 January**

**Basil the Great and**

**Gregory of Nazianzus**

**Bishops, Teachers of the Faith**

Gregory and Basil were two friends bound together by their desire to promote and defend the divinity of Christ as proclaimed in the Nicene Creed. This was against the seemingly overwhelming pressure from both Church and State for the establishment of Arianism, which denied Christ’s divinity and thus the whole Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Basil was renowned for being headstrong and forceful, in comparison to his friend, Gregory, who would rather spend his days in prayer and living the simple ascetic life. Gregory’s brilliance in oratory and theological debate meant that a hidden life was virtually impossible, and Basil drew him into the forefront of the controversy. Their joint persuasive eloquence convinced the first Council of Constantinople, meeting in 381 that their teaching was the truly orthodox one and the Council ratified the text of the Nicene Creed in the form in which it is used in the East to this day. Basil died in 379 and Gregory ten years later.

*Sourced from ‘Exciting Holiness’*