

Sunday 28th December 2025

The First Sunday of Christmas / Holy Innocents

Gospel Reading: Matthew 2.13-18

The Escape to Egypt

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

The Massacre of the Infants

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Other Readings: Jeremiah 31:15-17 Psalm 124 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Homily

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more." Matt. 2 18

The world in which Matthew sets the birth of Christ is the real world, one in which the lamentation of women for lost children, and their refusal to be comforted because **"they are no more,"** is all too familiar. His account of the infancy of Jesus reaches its darkest note in this passage. Jesus himself may be rescued from destruction, but violence and atrocity attend his life from the earliest moment.

Herod the Great, the king who ruled the Jewish people for the Romans, was a ruthless character. While there is no other historic record of the Massacre of the Innocents, - Roman historians were unlikely to be concerned with the massacre of children in a far-away province - it is entirely in character with Herod, who had murdered two of his own sons when he saw them as a threat to his throne. Horrific acts of violence were a part of life then, and we know all too well that the same is true now.

Yet, this is Christmas time, and we try hard to lay aside thoughts of the atrocities being committed in our world, to focus on more heartwarming things – family, good food, gifts – whatever gives us a feel-good-factor. “Christmas is for the children,” we often say, and many will have enjoyed watching wrapping paper torn from boxes, ... only to find the box was more interesting than what was inside it! But in spite of our wish to turn our gaze from the inhumanity perpetrated on young and old, this Sunday’s reading is a stark reminder that Jesus was born into a world in which children were at risk, and it brings us back to the harsh reality that we live in one where things have not changed that much.

When he was Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams wrote that what was unique and novel about Christianity was its idea of God in the form of a baby. We are so used to that idea, that we do not sense how radical it was; and we are so used to it that we fail to recognise how radical are the demands it makes upon us. So, Jesus says, **“He who receives one such child in my name, receives me, and he who receives me, receives the one who sent me.”** Children then are the sacramental presence of Jesus, they are our pattern for discipleship, and our care for them, our protection of them, should be unequivocal.

We should resist sentimentalising children while turning a blind eye to the effects our world has on them. In the wars we see on our TV screens, we hear so many Rachels lamenting their dead or wounded, sick or starving children. The American singer John Denver recited, on his album *Poems, Prayers, and Promises*, a poem by an anonymous author called *The Box* which spoke of the effects of war, particularly upon children. Towards its end are the bleak words: “But no one seems to want to save the children anymore.”

There are ‘wars’ fought on other fronts too. In our own society there is the disproportionate effect of poverty and debt and bad housing on children. There are numerous reports that underline the lack of emotional security felt by many, with high levels of anxiety fuelled by social media, partly due to the bullying that occurs in that arena, and the pressure to conform to this image of being male or female. Children, those most precious to us, and those most vulnerable, have been made consumers of often dangerous material. As a society and as the Church, we share a duty of care to the children with whom we live, with those who attend our services and events, with those in our school and wider communities.

We are all responsible for the care and wellbeing of our children – those we know, and those in society who are in most need, and at most risk of harm. It's inescapable.

This passage of scripture is hard to hear. News of children being harmed here, and across the globe, is hard to hear. Let's not avert our eyes today; let's not forget that we are accountable for our action, ... and our inaction.

At Christmas we are asked to invite the Christ-child into our hearts and lives, but we cannot do that without accepting the responsibility that comes with Him – to care for the least, the lost and the last – for in the Kingdom of God, the least are the most sacred, the lost must be sought out and loved, and the last are to be placed first.

Conversation Questions

1. How does the Flight into Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents affect my understanding of the Christmas story, and our attitude to children who suffer violence, and to refugees?
2. What do we do in our parish to support children: in church or other schools; youth organisations? Do we support the work of the Childrens Society (a Church of England charity) with vulnerable children; or aid agencies which work with children and families?
3. Do we regard safeguarding as a priority or a tiresome chore?
4. Is there anything else from the passage not already discussed that speaks to you? What is it?
5. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

The Holy Innocents

*Heavenly Father,
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod,
thought they had done no wrong:
by the suffering 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 your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

*Almighty God,
who wonderfully created us in your own image
and yet more wonderfully restored us
through your Son Jesus Christ:
grant that, as he came to share in our humanity,
so we may share the life of his divinity;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

(or)

*God in Trinity,
eternal unity of perfect love:
gather the nations to be one family,
and draw us into your holy life
through the birth of Emmanuel,
our Lord Jesus Christ.*

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