

THE HOLY INNOCENTS - HOLY? INNOCENT?

Evensong - Sunday after Christmas

Today is one of those Liturgical muddles. It is Christmas One in the lectionary and the main theme - but yet if it were not a Sunday it would be Holy Innocents. To some extent our hands are tied, because the Pew Sheets come from the publishers and they make a decision about the prayers and readings. So this morning we went with Christmas One - this evening I would like to spend a few moments thinking about the slaughter of the Innocents.

You know by now that I have many commentaries and helpful reference books on the computer. So I have pottered about, seeking greater wisdom than mine own on the subject. I have been a bit surprised as I have delved.

As always in the history of Jesus, glory and suffering appear in juxtaposition. The wise men, the Magi, however many there may have been, had no intention of triggering Herod's murderous designs. They were simply warned to go home without paying the usual courtesy call on the King of the region - despite his firm invitation to them to come and tell him all about it. Nor was it part of God's plan that the baby - or more probably the sturdy 2 year old Jesus should fall a victim to the tyrant. God communicated to the players in this part of salvations carefully crafted plan. The 'wise men' returned 'into their own country another way;' and, warned in a dream, the Holy Family sought temporary shelter in Egypt.

Although Matthew does not specify Herod's motive, contemporary and secular records provide ample evidence of Herod's jealousy and paranoia for his throne. He feared his own family as rivals of his power to such an extent that he put his wife and several of his sons to death. Hence the saying: I had rather be Herod's sow than Herod's son. It is a very good pun in the original tongue, but the point is well made even in English.

Herod's kingdom, rife with messianic hopes and rumours, did produce some claimants. Herod himself leapt to the conclusion that the 'King of the Jews' whom the Magi sought was yet another rival. One commentator adds this: "Adding to his instability, a painful form of arteriosclerosis made the king subject to fits of delirium and rage". I think that this is probably speculative, but if Herod were like King Saul, rages and outburst of passion would be quite common in his palace.

So Herod was thwarted in getting intelligence of the exact location of this new threat. So he decided on a 'carpet bombing' approach to solve the problem. He

ordered an indiscriminate slaughter of all the children in Bethlehem and its immediate neighbourhood, from two years and under.

And so the tradition in the early church began. The Byzantine liturgy had 14,000 Holy Innocents and an early Syrian list of saints states that there were 64,000 little boys put to death. This is frankly incredible. The Catholic Encyclopaedia in 1910 suggested that these numbers were grossly inflated, and that for a town of that size probably only between six and twenty children would be killed, with a dozen or so more in the surrounding areas. But the deed was none the less atrocious; and the entry goes on to conclude these infants may justly be regarded as the 'protomartyrs,' the first witnesses, of Christ, 'the blossom of martyrdom' ('flores martyrum,' as *Prudentius* calls them).

This is the first point which gives me real difficulty. These small children knew nothing of Jesus, nor of his saving work of salvation in his death and resurrection. So how can they the first 'witnesses'? To be a witness, however you translate the word, requires that you have some knowledge of the events or person who is the subject of your testimony. So in the strictest terms, I cannot see how these poor kids could possibly have been the first witnesses to Jesus. Nor do I really see why they should have been designated 'Holy'.

Herod died March or April 4 BC. Currently there exists no historical or archaeological evidence of the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem having actually happened aside from the account by Matthew. The Jewish historian Josephus (from c. 37–c.100) who wrote about the period, makes no mention of this event. But he does record Herod's cruelty in other incidents. Many scholars argue that the slaughter of the innocents is a story added into the gospel narrative to glorify Jesus in some way. It has been suggested that the execution of Herod's two sons, whom Josephus describes as young men, inspired the account in Matthew. After all, these two sons were the Jewish children that Herod believed had sought to replace him.

Josephus records several other examples of Herod's willingness to commit such acts to protect his power against perceived threats, but suggests that not all such acts were recorded, as he summarizes that Herod "never stopped avenging and punishing every day those who had chosen to be of the party of his enemies."

So we can say with some confidence that such a massacre, a mere 20 or so boys, is indeed quite in keeping with the Herod as reported in historical records. Josephus' silence on this point is no great matter, since on other occasions also he has omitted events which to us seem important. What is important to us now

so often seemed trivial and unremarkable in the first century. The murder of a few infants in an insignificant village might scarcely warrant mention in a reign stained by so much bloodshed. Besides perhaps he had a special motive for this silence. Josephus, a Jew, always carefully suppresses, so far as possible, all that refers to the Christ — probably not only in accordance with his own religious views, but because mention of a Christ might have been dangerous to this thrusting self publicist.

So why does Matthew make so much of the event? Well, partly perhaps, so that he could find yet another prophecy to tie to Jesus, to thicken up the evidence to convince his Jewish readers that this child really was the promised one: He quotes:

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.”

But you see, the verse in Jeremiah has no connection with Herod’s slaughter of the children: Jeremiah was picturing the people of Jerusalem being led away in exile. In their sad journey to an alien land they pass Ramah, and Ramah was the place where Rachel lay buried; and Jeremiah pictures Rachel weeping, even in the tomb, for the fate that had befallen the people.

Matthew is doing what he so often did. In his eagerness he is finding a prophecy where none are applicable. But, again, we must remind ourselves that what seems strange to us seemed in no way strange to those for whom Matthew was writing in his day.

Other commentators suggest that the slaughter of the children and the flight into Egypt are some kind of Exodus in reverse. The flight into Egypt recalls the protection of the infant Moses from the plot of a wicked tyrant; the massacre of the innocents recalls the slaying of the Hebrew children by Pharaoh; the return from Egypt is explicitly linked to Israel’s Exodus from Egypt. It can be argued that Matthew portrays Jesus throughout the Gospel as a new Moses, the founder and lawgiver of the true Israel who in his career recapitulates the story of Moses and the Exodus.

Well, what are we to make of it all two thousand years or so later? Did it happen? Yes, almost certainly - but not on a scale that 5 and 6th centuries piety suggests. It was only about 20 children. ‘Only’ 20. Does that make it any better? No of course not. Evil is evil, whether it is the holocaust which accounted for millions, or the death of single old person mugged on the way home from picking up their pension.

So why do we set time aside to think about it? To me, and this is a personal reflection and not from any of my commentaries, the point is this: it typifies the world Christ came to save - as the carol says "unto such a world as this". The poor hapless boys are collateral damage. God didn't order them to be slaughtered in order to pump up the status of the Word made Flesh. The killings were a casual action by a tyrant who was used to issuing such orders. In our day, Saddam Hussein would kill many more innocent people whom he thought were plotting against him. Occasional and almost random evil.

And it was into such a world that God sent his son. God picked the time and the place. As a boy, Jesus would have seen the results of evil, in the form of 2,000 Roman crucifixions along the highway - the punishment for a failed armed insurrection in the area where he was growing up. He so clearly knew what he was taking on - he knew how the world worked. And it was this violent and brutal world which he came to use its own weapons against itself. Out of the betrayal, the casual flogging, the crucifixion came the streams of grace from God himself.

Sacred Infant, all divine, What a tender love was Thine, Thus to come from highest bliss Down to such a world as this. Yes, even these words of Edward Caswall feel cosy. So the church calendar tries to disabuse us of all the soft, cosy, niceness of Christmas. On Boxing day we remember Stephen - the first true martyr; today, we have the Holy innocents, and tomorrow it is Thomas Becket.

Dear Lord, may we never forget the reality of the nativity, the depths of depravity into which the world can sink, and the power of the cross to rescue and restore us and show us the way back to the God who did all this for his broken and hurting world.