

Jeremiah 31. 15 – 17

1 Corinthians 1. 26 – 39

Matthew 2. 13 – 18

The Feast of the Holy Innocents

Fr Alex

Here we are, just three days on from Christmas Day, still fresh with Christmas joy (or perhaps not quite so fresh depending on how much Christmas sherry you've enjoyed): but today the Church calendar gives us something quite serious and sobering to ponder, the feast of the Holy Innocents.

We've celebrated love coming down in the infant Jesus at Christmas – but all of a sudden this love seems very weak and fragile indeed.

In fact this is the third feast in a row, post-Christmas Day, though they can often be lost in the busyness of the season. But this rich and complex start to our celebration of the Lord's birth has something important to say to us about the true power of this love that he brings.

On Boxing Day, the very first day after Christ is born, we remembered the first Christian martyr, St Stephen. The first person to die for their faith. That brings us straight back down to earth, doesn't it.

But St Stephen's feast coming hard on the heels of Christmas Day shows us that this love that comes down in the person of Jesus at Christmas, is so much more than just a nice feeling that fades away all too soon. This love is powerful. It can conquer violence, and even death.

As Stephen is being stoned to death, he prays for his persecutors. It is Stephen's love, his unconditional forgiveness of those who are killing him, that triumphs over the powers of darkness and brings him into new life. It is a sign for us of the next great feast to come in a few months' time; Christ's love on the cross that triumphs over death on Good Friday and Easter Day.

In praying for his killers, Stephen proclaims his belief in the power of the love that comes down at Christmas; that no matter what people may do to us, God is with us in the darkness, and brings us through it into his unfailing light.

Then yesterday, we celebrated St John's day. The writer of the fourth Gospel, the disciple whom Jesus loved. John's incredible prologue to his Gospel reveals the truth that this love that came down at Christmas is not something new, created in order to solve some problem with creation.

It existed in God before the worlds were formed; it poured forth in the act of creation, and in the Incarnation; and will sustain the world until the end of things.

And in John we are again drawn towards Good Friday and Easter Day. At the foot of the cross, depicted on top of our beautiful rood screen here in church, we see with St John and with Our Lady the formation of the first Christian community. "Woman, here is your Son." "John, here is your mother."

This love that comes down at Christmas is a love to be shared, a love that crosses boundaries; that even in the midst of what looks like death, disaster, and the end of things, can bring about something new and beautiful and life-giving.

It redefines what our idea of a family is. For many, Christmas is the ultimate family time, isn't it. But for many others, Christmas can be a very difficult time. For those with no family; the bereaved; those who have had a bad experience of family life, through neglect, or abuse.

But this love that comes down at Christmas incorporates us all into the great Christian family. Through our baptism, we all become sons and daughters of God, and brothers and sisters of each other.

And today, we keep the feast of the Holy Innocents. The jealous Herod, terrified at the thought of someone growing up to take away his earthly power, murders all the young children in and around Bethlehem, hoping to catch the infant Jesus. It is the most appalling act.

And in the midst of this tragedy we learn that the Holy Family begin their life together as refugees, fleeing great distances to find safety. It's a strange start to the life of God on earth.

But it reveals to us the truth that love came down to us at Christmas not as a powerful king or a conquering warrior; but in the form of a poor baby: weak, defenceless, helpless. God, who created everything that is, relied on his own creation for sustenance and protection. He relies on us to nurture and protect this love; to work with him to shine his light into the darkest places.

The horrific murders that we remember today call us to confront the darkness of the world into which Christ came as the light; and to recognise just how much we still need his light to shine. There is no shortage of innocents in our own time, and no shortage of would-be Herods.

Our world needs the love that Christ brings at Christmas: and it needs us to share that love in all we do.

So how can we do it? Well, I think we can take our example from Our Lady.

We have this strange and no doubt distressing birth, with rough shepherds and wondrous angels, even foreign kings with meaningful gifts, all showing up in this backstreet in Bethlehem; and all who hear about it are amazed and in awe.

But we read that Mary treasures all their words and deeds and ponders them in her heart. That's how she begins to nurture the wonderful gift of love that has been entrusted to her.

And that's what we can do. We can enter fully into the beautiful mystery of this season; we can treasure the hymns, the readings, the art, the poetry. We can take time out to reflect on them and make room in our hearts for the great truths they reveal, and share that good news with others.

And we can pray that this amazing love that is born at Christmas can be born in us too, today, and every day. Amen.