

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 28 December 2025, the Holy Innocents

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Heavenly Father,
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod,
though 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.

Amen.

Readings: Psalm 124; Matthew 2:13-18

Today's reflection is by Reader, Pete Gillions

At the carol service we listened to the account of God entering the world. There with Mary, Joseph and humble animals the scene is set. God in Christ entering the world not in power and might but as a baby in a manger. We heard of joyful angels, of excited shepherds and the wise men presenting gifts. The readings spoke promises being fulfilled, of peace on earth and hope. Then right alongside this Mathew goes on to recount what happened later when innocent babies were slaughtered by Herod's soldiers. What is difficult to reconcile is that these two events are intrinsically linked. By looking at how these two events – one of great joy and one of great sadness - stand alongside each other can help us see how our faith can respond in the face such tragedy.

Let's remind ourselves of what happened. Remember when the wise men first came to the region looking for the King of the Jews their search took them to Herod Palace. Fearing this may be a threat to his power Herod asked them to keep him informed when they found this new king. As we know well, they travelled on to Bethlehem where they found the one they were looking for and presented their gifts. The same spirit that led them to the stable also warned them in a dream against informing Herod of their discovery, so they quietly left the area. As did the Holy family, after Joseph had been warned by an angel. So far so good.

But what happened next was simply evil. When Herod discovered that the wise men had left without telling him where the new King was he responded quickly with a ruthless display of deadly force. To eliminate any threat to his power he ordered his soldiers to slaughter all the infants in the region, To ensure he killed the one probably

around twenty infants were killed. But by then Jesus, the one they were looking for, had already moved on. Matthew tells us that was 'crying and loud lamentation'. These brief words can barely express the grief of parents and families whose innocent infants had been slaughtered. Jesus had left for the safety of Egypt but he had unleashed a tidal wave of heartache in His wake. It just doesn't seem to be fair at all.

These two accounts, one of rejoicing and the other of lament, are in sharp contrast to each other. But if we look a little deeper, we see that they complement each other, the baby in a manger help us see the slaughter of the innocents in a new light, just as the slaughter of the innocents help us see the baby in a manger in a new light. One thing we can say that the slaughter of the innocents is a graphic example of the brokenness of the world. A brokenness we see throughout history. And, sadly, a brokenness that is only too evident today in places: Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine. The tragic shooting in Australia was well reported but many other deadly events never make the headlines. Similarly, this event was not recorded by other historians. What we can see in the tragic slaughter of the is a stark reminder of the purpose of Christ entering the world – to start the work of reconciliation and to healing.

Perhaps what the slaughter of the innocents does is make us take another look at the birth of Jesus and see it for what it truly is. The sentimentalised story of Christ in the cradle has a darker side. That despite the rejoicing there was a cross shaped shadow cast over the scene in the stable. The Christ in the cradle was to become the Christ of the cross. That dark shadow is seen in a variety of ways. The biblical narratives frame Jesus' birth and death as the fulfilment of ancient prophecies, many of which explicitly mention his suffering and death. For example, Psalm 22 speaks of hands and feet being pierced, clothes being divided, and lots cast for a garment, which the Gospels connect directly to the crucifixion events. Isaiah 53 describes a "suffering servant" who would be "pierced for our transgressions" and "led like a lamb to the slaughter".

As a child one of the gifts the wise men presented was Myrrh was an aromatic resin used for embalming and anointing the dead, clearly foreshadowing his death and burial. When Jesus was presented at the Temple as an infant, Simeon took him in his arms and prophesied to his mother Mary: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too". This "sword" is widely interpreted as a direct reference to the deep anguish Mary would experience at Jesus' crucifixion.

Taking all these things together we can see that Jesus' ultimate purpose, even from birth, was to be the sacrificial Saviour who would suffer and die for humanity. But that does not answer the question – why did the murder of innocent infants have to be part of the story? Why didn't the wise men go straight to the infant Jesus directly? I have read commentaries that say that this is paralleling Pharaoh's attempt to kill Hebrew babies in Exodus. Matthew is showing His readers that Jesus is the new Moses, a liberator whose early life mirrors Israel's liberation story. But did innocent infant lives

have to be taken to make a theological point. Imagine a grieving mother holding the lifeless body of her infant child in her arms and you running that idea by her.

Maybe the point is this. Life is not fair and never has been or will be. Innocent people have always suffered and died. And continue to do so to this day. There are things we cannot explain away, that have no neat answers.

At times like this we look to Christ on the cross and see the depths of God's love, a father whose only son tortured to death. But for once this story of innocent life being taken doesn't end there. By Christ's resurrection death was defeated and everything changed, for all time and for all eternity.

Our minds cannot contain the mystery of God and know why every tragedy occurs. We do not have the answers to every question life throws at us. But when we look at Christ on the cross, we realise that neither can our hearts contain all the love Christ has for us. And we hold on to the promise that one day all tears will be wiped away. Gods. That yet we can trust in the love of a God we see in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

The gift of Christ's birth and the loss of innocent infants stand alongside each other in scripture and in life. This informs the other. I will close with an example of what this might mean in real life. I mentioned the recent death of a friend of mine called Andy. He and his wife trusted in the love of God and she now grieves his loss. Her grief is informed by her faith – she has hope that one day all tears will be wiped away. But yet her grief is real and sometimes overwhelming. And this informs her faith. Some things can only be seen by eyes that have cried.

About 150 years ago an American lawyer lost his son to scarlet fever. He then suffered financial ruin in a fire. His wife and four daughters sailed to England but the boat they were in was in a collision and sunk with the loss of over 200 lives. He receives a telegram from his wife "Saved alone... What shall I do?". Overwhelmed by grief but anchored in faith, he wrote the lyrics to what became a great hymn, finding solace in his belief. The final lines speak of future hope: "O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, / The clouds be rolled back as a scroll; / The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend; / Even so, it is well with my soul." Through tear filled eyes He saw yet there was a hope, a hope found in Christ.

Our minds cannot find the answers to all of life's tragedies. But our hearts can trust in the love of God, a love that our hearts cannot contain. A love that says His promise to be with us by His Spirit for all time and eternity means that whatever we face we do not face it alone. And His promise to one day return to restore all things gives us a grounded hope. That hatred, injustice and fear do not have the last word but instead love, justice and grace will prevail.

This morning Christ invites us to join Him at the communion table where we relive again God's gift of love for each and every one of us, a love we can trust, that will one day lead us home.

Amen

S⁺JAMES WOODSIDE
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