



## *St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd*

### The Collect for the Holy Innocents (28 December) (*Book of Common Prayer*)

**O almighty God, who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast ordained strength, and madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths: Mortify and kill all vices in us, and so strengthen us by thy grace, that by the innocency of our lives, and constancy of our faith, even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

A collect in Latin to mark this day is contained in the Gelasian Sacramentary (which is at least as old as the 8th century). That prayer was the basis for the Reformers' collect for the 1549 Prayer Book; but that translation was in turn almost entirely reshaped for the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Typical of the Prayer Book collects, in this one we identify pairings and echoes: "babes and sucklings"; "mortify and kill"; "innocency...constancy". God's "Name" is a way of referring to God's whole nature and being.

Miles Coverdale translated the psalms into English in 1535, and it is his psalter that came to be incorporated into the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. This collect draws on wording from his rendition of Psalm 8: "*Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings hast Thou ordained strength, because of Thine enemies : that Thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger*" (verse 2).

This day to mark the Holy Innocents is based on the story in Matthew's Gospel of King Herod's vicious reaction at being fooled by the wise men, who did not report to him the exact location of the one they had recognised as the Messiah, as he had asked: "*Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men*" (2:16).

The author of Matthew's Gospel is showing us that a pattern in history is being repeated. Through fear of the growing number of Hebrews in Egypt, Pharaoh had cruelly decreed the death of all new-born Hebrew male children (Exodus 1:15-22).

And now in Herod we are to recognise the same kind of fear and the same kind of viciousness. The Gospel thus invites us to recognise the parallel between Moses' escape from murder, and Jesus's.

The collect uses the story of the Holy Innocents to home in on our spiritual need for God's grace. It is a prayer that, through Jesus, seeks the re-establishment within us of the kind of innocence and transparency that belongs to babies and very young children. The focus of the prayer is therefore upon our own lives. But the underlying theme of child murder surely prompts us to pray for all innocent victims of cruelty. This theme is captured in the collect for this day to be found in the American Prayer Book of 1979, a prayer which invites our resounding Amen: *We remember this day, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by the order of King Herod. Receive, we beseech thee, into the arms of thy mercy all innocent victims; and by thy great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish thy rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

***James Graham, December 2025***