

## **Holy Innocents Sermon**

28 December 2020

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### The Sin of Herod

Today we keep the feast of the Holy Innocents.

It is significant that the great, joyous celebrations of Christmastide, beginning with Midnight Mass and continuing on Christmas Day, celebrating the coming of Our Lord in the flesh, are swiftly followed by the bloody martyrdom of St Stephen, and the massacre of the innocent children by King Herod.

Helpfully, on Christmas Eve, Fr George emphasised Christ as the light which ‘shineth in the *darkness*’; which the darkness had not overcome. The day before, Alex’s sermon focused on John the Baptist’s words ‘I am not the Christ,’ in the Gospel passage which concludes the preparatory season of Advent. We were invited then to uphold the same realisation, that we are not the Christ; that we wait expectantly and selflessly for the coming of our saviour; for the gift of grace through *his* self-sacrificial love.

The Innocents' Day, perhaps most awfully and viscerally, demonstrates both the destructive hatefulness of self-centred humanity at its worst, *and* the loving, saving nature of God. It witnesses most tragically and gloriously to the failure of the darkness to overcome the light; the failure of evil to overcome what is good and innocent. At the same time, it tells us more of the nature of sin – that its end lies in annihilation, in self-denial through self-assertion.

Against John the Baptist's supreme example of faithfulness, as the greatest of the prophets, we can contrast the opposite extreme of Herod's; the man who would declare *himself* the Christ, and is not above the murder of children to realise this.

More can be learned by looking at the *man* Herod himself, of whom we know a surprising amount. He was quite complex, combining many different worlds; being racially Arabic, religiously Jewish and culturally Greek. According to historians, Greek was Herod's first language, and he made various attempts to turn Jerusalem into a Greek city. As a young man he is described as having been good looking and powerfully built. He was a charismatic and strong leader, personally leading his armies in ten different wars. Politically he

was Roman; he was a friend and ally of Mark Anthony in the Roman civil war against Octavian, who was to become Augustus Caesar. Upon the defeat of Anthony and Cleopatra, Herod sought and was granted an audience with Octavian. He openly acknowledged his support for the defeated side, but implored the new Caesar to consider ‘Not *whose* friend, but what a *good* friend, I was.’

His cunning paid off, and Herod’s position on the throne of Jerusalem became more secure than ever.

It is possible to see in Herod the archetypal figure corrupted by his own lust for power and glory. As the years went on, he took more and more wives, (ten in total), and increasingly saw his own sons as little more than political rivals; he ordered the strangling of his two ‘favourites’ in Samaria – I would have hated to be a son that he didn’t like. Herod grew increasingly bloated, diseased and ever more embittered and obsessed with his power. This is the Herod, who upon hearing of the birth of Christ, diligently asks the Wise Men to inform him of his birthplace, surely to kill him.

For us, Herod represents the *opposite* of John the Baptist’s faithful humility; he represents the human desire to supplant God utterly, to declare oneself the Christ. It is this he takes to its grim conclusion with the

slaughter of the innocents. Herod's sin is life-denying in the most overt and monstrous way. It sees people as means, not ends; as either tools or threats.

So why is this passage included in our lectionary? We might rather want to consider why it isn't emphasised more. For one thing it illustrates profoundly the necessity, the raw *need*, for the very Incarnation which we celebrate in Christmastide. As Kenneth E. Bailey put it:

A mindless, bloody atrocity took place at the birth of Jesus. After reading that story, the reader is not caught unawares by the human potential for terror that shows its ugly face again on the cross. At the beginning of the Gospel and at its conclusion, Matthew presents pictures of the depth of evil that Jesus came to redeem. This story heightens the reader's awareness of the willingness on the part of God to expose himself to the total vulnerability which is at the heart of the incarnation. [Bailey concludes] If the Gospel can flourish in a world that produces the slaughter of innocents and the cross, the Gospel can flourish anywhere. From this awareness the

readers of the Gospels in any age can take heart.

It's worth noting that Bailey spent a significant amount of time in the Middle East, and saw how accustomed some areas had become to near constant war and atrocity. It is important for us to remember that, alongside the glad tidings of Christmas, the joy of the Virgin Mary, the glorious singing of the Angelic chorus, Christ was also born amidst the very worst aspects of humanity. Our need for him was demonstrated all too swiftly. The reality of the light which shineth in darkness, which is not overcome by the darkness, although perhaps surrounded by it, is physically and historically experienced.

As Fr George put it on Christmas Eve:

Herod could not separate these children from the love of Christ which conquers death. The Word made flesh embraced these little children with the arms stretched wide on the cross even before, born in Bethlehem, he was capable of walking or talking... the affirmation is the same: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The tradition of the Church has always emphasised the innocence of the infants, often called the Holy Innocents. It's in no doubt of the heavenly realm which they inhabit, hence our quite beautiful epistle today from the Book of Revelation.

I've given my focus, however, to Herod himself, as an archetypal example of sin and human frailty. Among the self-denying ironies of his lust for power is its increasing absence; paranoia and fear ruled him more and more, as we have heard.

Reflecting on our passage today, St John Chrysostom concluded that:

Yet surely it was a case not for anger, but for fear and awe: he ought to have perceived, that he was attempting impossible things. But he is not refrained. For when a soul is insensible and incurable, it yields to none of the medicines given by God... For driven wild by this anger, and envy... he takes account of nothing, but rages even against nature herself, and his anger against the Wise men who had mocked him, he vents upon the children that had done no wrong: venturing then in Palestine upon a deed akin to the things that had been done in Egypt.

How do we seek after Christ? What dwells in our hearts as we contemplate him.

When the angel comes to Joseph at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, he says to him 'Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.' This was, as we were reminded the other day, Joseph's version of 'be it unto me according to thy word.' We can compare the fears of Joseph and Herod; the one which was not senseless and closed off from the divine love, but ready to listen and receive it, and the other which did prove senseless, which sought to supplant that love and destroy it, destroying itself in the process.

We can also recognise in ourselves the same impulses which Herod acted upon, if not to the same overt degree. Do we stifle what is innocent and *of God* in us; do we neglect, or allow to be choked up, the young seeds which God has planted in us, through our own selfishness? What opportunities for grace to abound and flourish in us do we destroy through our own lethargy, spitefulness or apathy?

Yet the Christian lives in hope, despite the greatest horrors and terrors the world can conceive, because of

the loving, redemptive self-giving of God. As Fr George summed up for us on Christmas Eve:

‘We all must know that we are destined for a love which is greater than we can be given in this world. The trials and tribulations of this last year do not overcome the light of Christ in the world or in our lives... Knowing that the darkness does not overcome the light of Christ does not take away our problems. But this confidence does anchor our feet in a hope which does not disappoint as we address and face these problems. Christ was born in the midst of messiness and struggle. We can expect him to be present as light in the midst of our struggles.’

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*