

**Bruton Parish Church
January 3, 2010
Second Sunday after Christmas
The Reverend Charles A. Robinson**

Blessed be the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

The news website headline on Wednesday read, “Staggered suicide attacks kill 23 in Iraq – including this infant child. A gruesome picture of a bloodied and battered baby’s body accompanied the headline. Later in the day when I revisited the site the photograph and any mention of the unknown child had disappeared and a new one focused upon the 13 policemen killed in the same attacks – the death of the innocent was overshadowed by the sheer volume of death of officials.

We want to start a new year of hope and anticipation for the good things of God and our place in them – the Gospel. But, we must face the news and wonder about the death and destruction.

The Gospel today from the second chapter of Matthew is a stunning and dramatic story. However, the lectionary seems to seek to protect us from the cruelty and brutality in the story. I hope that you noticed that verses 16, 17, and 18 are missing from the reading.

These verses are reserved for use on the Day of the Holy Innocents. This day is recognized on the Church calendar on December 28th - completing a trilogy of immediate post-Christmas observances. This year it occurred last Monday.

Having expended so much energy upon the blessed Christmas, we do not normally meet to commemorate this day. I have decided to expand the reading for today to include it. It reads:

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ “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.” (Matthew 2:16-18). This quote from Jeremiah is the 15th verse of the chapter from which we read this morning and is also eliminated from our lectionary reading.

Herod the Great, Ruler of the Jews, appointed by the Romans 40 years before the birth of Christ, as part of the Pax Romana solutions of Augustus and his minions, kept “the peace” in Palestine for 37 years. The Jewish historian, Josephus records Herod’s ruthless control, and genuine ability. Josephus describes Herod as “a man of great barbarity towards everyone.” He was an Idumaeen, married to the

daughter of Hyrcanus, the last legitimate Hasmonean ruler. Herod was continually in fear of losing his throne. It is not surprising that the Magi's report of the birth of an infant King of the Jews filled him with fear and anger. The event described in Matthew is not recorded in secular history, but the story of the Massacre of the Innocents is completely consistent with what is known of Herod's character. To protect himself against being supplanted by an infant king, Herod ordered the slaughter of all male children under two years of age in Bethlehem and the surrounding region. The surrounding area of Bethlehem was not heavily populated and no one knows how many children were killed. However, the church has always honored these innocent children as Martyrs. Augustine of Hippo called them "...buds, killed by the frost of persecution the moment they showed themselves."¹

We experience Herod as a villain and rightly so, but, in fact, he was the kind of pragmatic political leader that Machiavelli would present as the ideal 1500 years later – the leader that accepts and promotes the killing of innocents in pursuit of the greater good and the general well-being of the larger population - to keep "the peace." Machiavelli and Herod would hardly be presented in our society as ideals for leadership and policy. Yet many decisions using questionable means for desired ends persist.

It is easy to focus upon the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt and the miraculous and divine communications with Joseph that keeps his little family safe for destiny. Jesus is rescued from slaughter so that he may become the Lord of us all. But, to omit and ignore this slaughter is an injustice and deprives us of a very important truth for our lives.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are saved, but the innocents die – there is no angelic dream to warn them, no Magi to plot to save them. They are destroyed by the brutality of an insecure and vicious despot. Innocents, children, and others have died and continue to be slaughtered at the hands of brutality, terror, hatred, and tyranny and for some perceived necessity or security.

The hymn, *In Bethlehem* (#246), recognizes that amidst the songs of praises and joy that greet the Savior there are cries of those whose children died. These cries call to us through the ages and the "aching hearts" and lack of understanding are ours today when the innocent are killed. But, the hymn finds the good news, the Gospel. The good news is offered that in every night of loss there is still the wonder of the cross bearing human anguish. Jesus, who went to the cross, shares in and understands the deepest suffering. It is in the Resurrection that we can find life to bring to the loss of innocence. The hymn prays that we will let our lives be controlled by the love of Christ and thereby we will be able to conquer hate, to build rather than destroy. Joy is found in the shared pain. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus admonishing that any who wish to be his disciples must take up their cross and follow Him and that those who do not are not worthy of Him. (Mat 10:38, 16:24; Mar 8:34; Luk 9:23).

¹ Extracted and paraphrased from Lesser Feast and Fasts

The usual metaphor that is applied to Jesus words is that sinfulness should be laid aside and new life taken up. This is, of course, consistent with our call and covenant and is right that we do.

However, we must not set aside the idea that we should also bring on our journey of following Christ that which is found at the cross. The cross is the place of suffering and pain. This is a meeting place where the Incarnation we have been celebrating in Jesus this Christmas season becomes available to us all. In the cross, God assures us of solidarity in the sufferings of this life. Jesus calls us to take up that which the cross brings to Jesus' life and to ours and to share in that with Him. He also calls us to find comfort and joy in the resolution to it – Resurrection life. Jesus shares suffering, agony, pain, and heartache. These expressions of our pain are met with God in the Incarnation of Jesus and at the moment of the cross.

As we approach Epiphany and seek to find deeper relationship with our God, and with Christ revealed, it is important that we recognize that our lives do not consist of constant exuberance. This is not to detract from the joys of the Christmas season, but to recognize that our lives are mixtures of joys and sorrows, affirmations and disappointments, revelations and lack of understanding.

In his book, *We Preach Christ Crucified*, Kenneth Leech warns that worship that is “marked by a superficial cheerfulness (can be)...offensive to...(and) of no help to, the person who is going through dark times.” Our worship, he suggests should be a “dialectic” between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Indeed, we live in both lament and praise. God dwells with us in both.²

Saint John of the Cross first used the phrase, “dark night of the soul.” A cursory reading of Saint John of the Cross makes him seem like a melancholic and dismal soul obsessed with self-denial. However, Saint John intends to present the totality of the Christian experience. He shows, as the Psalm says, that darkness and light are the same and that God is present in both. One cannot know the light without the darkness. Grace cannot be known, if grace is not needed.³

The Gospel - the good news is that in the midst of terrible destruction and horrific death, there is still salvation. In the suffering and death of the innocent, Christ survives, dwells, abides with us, like the Emmanuel. He is acquainted with suffering, with grief. This is God on the most intimate level for us – a God that understands, because God feels what we feel.

² Leech, Kenneth. *We Preach Christ Crucified: The Proclamation of the Cross in a Dark Age*. (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994), p.77

³ Leech, Kenneth. *We Preach Christ Crucified: The Proclamation of the Cross in a Dark Age*. (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994), p.76-77

And so, we close our Christmas celebration and step onto the road of Epiphany. We find a Savior born into the darkness and angst of our world, troubled and killed by its oppressors and pain, but Resurrected to life in every disciple, in each of us.

We are the disciples called to bring this transformative Gospel alternative to our world – a world that imagines that peace and security are obtained through elimination and destruction of that which stands in its way – innocent or not. Make no mistake ours is a pragmatic, Herodian world.

We are the ones to proclaim and to effect change in our world in the name of Christ – to really value the Innocents in word and in deed.

As the hymn proclaims:

“May that great love our lives control and conquer hate in every soul, till, pledged to build and not destroy, we share your pain and find your joy.”⁴

Blessed be the name of God.

⁴ Hymn #246, *In Bethlehem*, The Hymnal 1982, Church Publishing, Inc.