

The Holy Innocents

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 28th December 2025

Reading(s): Hebrews 2:10-18; **Matthew 2:13-23**

Introduction: the story so far

This liturgical year, which started on Advent Sunday, features the Gospel of Matthew as the main gospel in the lectionary. One week ago we heard of the birth of Jesus from the point of view of Joseph, the husband of Mary. At our Carol Services, and on Christmas Day, we heard how the Magi or Wise Men were led by a star to the infant Jesus, and how they were warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, who had asked them to report to him once they located the newborn Messiah.

Herod the Great

Today we hear the sequel – Herod, troubled by the thought of a possible contender for his throne, orders his troops to go to Bethlehem and massacre all children under the age of two, based on when the magi had said they first saw the star.

In case you think this action by Herod is too extreme to be historically accurate, we know a lot about the character of Herod from the detailed writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. Herod was known as “the Great” for his wealth and the extensive building works he undertook, including the construction of the port town of Caesarea Maritima and several fortresses, and, most importantly, the splendid reconstruction and beautification of the Temple in Jerusalem.

But he had all the signs of a paranoid megalomaniac. Herod had no compunction about getting rid of anyone he perceived as a threat to his throne. Early in his reign he appointed his 17-year-old brother-in-law as high priest, and the next year had him drowned at a party. He later executed his wife, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law and three of his own sons.¹ I doubt he had any moral qualms about sending his soldiers to kill all the children aged two and under in the village of Bethlehem. By the way, the best translation of the Greek text is “children” rather than “boys”. Children under two would have been dressed similarly, regardless of sex, and I imagine that the soldiers would have descended on the village suddenly, breaking into houses and killing any young children indiscriminately. In Herod’s view, the death of the innocents was merely “collateral damage” in his pursuit of the newborn Messiah.

Crimes against humanity

I’m sad to say that this horrendous crime is echoed in many situations of conflict today. The October 7th massacre of Israelis by Hamas particularly springs to mind; as does the indiscriminate bombing of blocks of flats in Gaza in the Israeli response, causing far greater numbers of casualties. Many other massacres have taken place in our lifetimes all over the world, and continue today. People who have the mindset that “the end justifies the means”, and who are filled with hatred or the desire for vengeance, may stop at nothing to achieve their objectives. And they also seek to persuade others that

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

their victims deserve it, simply because they belong to a particular ethnic, religious or political group.

This was what happened in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, where a radio station called on people to "weed out the cockroaches," meaning kill the Tutsis. Members of the other ethnic group, the Hutus, started killing neighbours and even members of their own family who were from the Tutsi minority.² And all this in a country which was supposedly majority Christian. The same thing, of course, happened in Germany under Adolf Hitler, with the dehumanisation of Jews and other minorities – in a country with a long history of culture and Christian heritage.

And while it's easy to point the finger at other countries where the innocent are persecuted and dehumanised, we should be very careful that we don't allow prejudice and fear to breed dissension in our society, or the scapegoating of vulnerable minorities, such as asylum seekers. I'm sure we're all aware of how some people in our country are using religion to further their nationalistic aims. We should indeed be proud of the Christian heritage of this country, but if we understand the Christian faith correctly, we'll know that we're called to love our neighbour as ourselves, and that our neighbour includes people of other races and backgrounds.

And we shouldn't forget that today's gospel speaks of the Holy Family being refugees from persecution in Egypt.

Protecting the innocent

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-26875506>

Today's gospel reading about the massacre of the children of Bethlehem makes for uncomfortable reading, especially when we see the Holy Innocents, as they have been called, as representatives of all those who suffer unjustly because of the hatred or fear of others, or because their existence threatens the position or ambitions of others.

After the Rwandan genocide, international troops who were stationed in Rwanda were accused of standing by and doing nothing to prevent it. The same accusation was made of peace-keeping forces in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990's, and is made of Israeli troops in the occupied West Bank who allow or even assist Israeli settlers in acts of violence against Palestinians.³ Failing to act, when you could stop injustice, is tantamount to being complicit.

One serious injustice that has been taking place in our country over many years, which is controversial, is abortion. The vast majority of abortions carried out in England and Wales are not to protect the life of the mother or because the child would be severely disabled, but for "social" reasons. This could just mean that the baby is unwanted, and in a society where personal choice is considered the highest ideal for happiness, those who don't have choices, including the unborn, are sacrificed on the altar of convenience or personal autonomy. As Christians, this should concern us deeply.

But abortion for social reasons also includes situations where a woman feels unable to care for the child or under pressure due to poverty or other difficult social circumstances.

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj4wwxz12jko> is one report among many.

Charities like *Life* offer emotional and practical support for women considering abortion and for women and men after an abortion has taken place⁴. This is a practical and compassionate response to people in genuine need.

Our response

What should our response be to these big and difficult issues? One response could be to cover our ears, because we don't want to be distressed by knowing about the injustices taking place in the world. Now, if listening to bad news is a serious risk to your mental health, I'll grant you that response.

But unless that's the case, I don't think we have the luxury of ignoring injustice. The Good Samaritan stopped and did what he could to help the wounded Jew. We can only do what we can, but even the little that we can do makes a difference.

One response is to take advantage of our democratic institutions. I have written to the current MP and the previous one about issues in the news, and received replies. I also support charities and pressure groups who can make a difference in practical ways.

There are all kinds of situations at a local level or in our workplace or circle of acquaintances where we may have opportunities to get involved in helping people who are vulnerable or facing injustice. This month many people bought a gift for an underprivileged child in the local community, and others have raised money for the Children's Society.

⁴ <https://lifecharity.org.uk/>

Standing up for justice can mean something as simple as speaking up for someone who is being disrespected or unfairly treated in a work, social or family context. When you hear a racist or misogynistic comment that someone makes in a conversation, speak up and disagree, rather than keep quiet.

Conclusion

The story of the massacre of the Holy Innocents, the children of Bethlehem, is shocking and uncomfortable. It disturbs and tarnishes the happy, hopeful feel of the Christmas story. And it reminds us that Jesus was born into a context where life was cheap and the powerful could get away with oppressing the weak. Jesus himself was later to be unjustly and cruelly killed to satisfy the hatred of his enemies and for the convenience of a Roman governor.

Jesus calls his followers today to live out the values of God's kingdom of righteousness and justice, to be salt and light in the world. If we could ask the murdered children of Bethlehem, or the victims of any modern conflict, what they would want to say to us, I think their message would be:

- Don't look away
- Do what you can
- Stand up for the weak
- Speak up against injustice

May I suggest that in 2026 each of us takes one significant step to tackle injustice in the world. It could be to become informed about a social or political issue and pray about it; or to support a charity that fights injustice; or to volunteer our

time or skills. So that when we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, these are not empty words, but our prayers are backed up by a commitment to work for God’s kingdom of justice and righteousness within whatever is our sphere of influence. As the apostle John wrote:

“Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action”.⁵

Prayer

Heavenly Father,
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod,
though they had done no wrong:
give us grace neither to act cruelly
nor to stand indifferently by,
but to defend the weak from the tyranny of the strong;
in the name of Jesus Christ, who suffered for us,
but who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

⁵ 1 John 3:18 NRSV