

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Christmas to Epiphany 2012/3

We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Collect for Holy Innocents' Day (December 28) Book of Common Prayer, Page 238

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, I have a vivid recollection of a picture book of the story of Christmas that I had as a child. The Bible stories were illustrated with beautifully bright colored cartoon-like drawings. The cartoon frame which best sticks in my memory was one illustrating the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:16-19) In the picture a soldier was holding a baby in one hand with a raised sword in the other. A distressed mother was on her knees nearby pleading. Even as a child I remember thinking that this frame was just a bit out of step with the others, which depicted things like an adoring couple near a manger bed, shepherds - first startled then adoring - and wisemen on a purposeful journey. At some point I learned that the slaughter of Bethlehem's children was indeed part of the Bible story of Christmas and that the Church invites us to remember this by keeping a feast day for the Innocents soon after Christmas Day.

There are some who would argue that children ought to be protected from such grim stories of injustice, horror, suffering and death. It is more than common to find our children's Bible stories completely sanitized. I've actually read arguments for skipping over the story of the Crucifixion as being too violent! Remember, we live in a world where kids are regularly entertained with tales of flesh eating zombies or electronic games involving all kinds of mayhem. It is also a world where bad things really do happen and all but the most extremely sheltered children eventually get wind of them. Is it any wonder that a sappy Christian faith is so easily cast aside?

The recent massacre of innocents in Connecticut brings home some very ugly realities. Because it happened in a pleasant, safe suburban community it is impossible to disregard it. Pointless violence happens. Innocent people - children - get swept up in it and are harmed. Those who survive are scarred - emotionally if not physically. Underneath all the brave cries of "never again!" there is a depressing sense that it all will occur again. Hopelessness creeps into our community life. At the risk of sounding flippant, let me say, "Welcome to my world!"

Violence is no stranger to Camden. At this writing sixty-seven murders have taken place this year. Most are young men 17 to 25. "Ah, well!" (I can hear the thoughts.) "They have chosen their way of life." When you look into the coffin at the face of a seventeen year old who had been part of the church's youth program, it doesn't matter that he had disfigured himself with a few tattoos which indicate some poor life choices. He was still someone's brother - someone's son. Don't fool yourself with the notion of choices either. After generations of poverty those choices are severely limited. Our children in Camden do not have much going for them. The violence it breeds would be shocking and intolerable to us all if we didn't try to explain it away. Children should not have their lives snatched away at an early age, neither should their hope be. No one uses the word "massacre" to describe what goes on in Camden, but perhaps after 67 dead we might acknowledge the enormity of the situation.

Farther afield, from the land of Jesus' birth, we are bombarded with reports of civil wars and air strikes. Gaza, Syria - these names evoke images of maimed and wounded children. Bethlehem may be free from war ravages at the moment, but people there are still subject to occasional violent outbursts. In the birth place of Jesus and the birth place of the Christian Movement peace on earth has not yet come. We forget that some of the oldest Christian communities in the world are found in these places. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters in Syria still speak the language that Jesus spoke. For centuries they have managed to survive - and sometimes thrive. They have lived as a minority community in a Muslim world and have successfully negotiated their way through it. They have endured hostile Muslim fanatics and arrogant European Christian Crusaders.

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours! (Luke 2:14) With this joyous note Christians ring in the Christmas festival. But how does one begin to make sense of all the violence in the world? The concern is not new. The faithful have lived with and pondered this contradiction for centuries. For a start, our forebears understood that it was pointless if not absolutely wrong to sanitize the faith. There were always attempts to dwell on the pretty things. There were attempts to deny or ignore the real presence of evil. Eventually these attempts were labeled heresy - false belief. They robbed the faith of its true radical nature. God did not take on flesh and blood to magically take away the bad things. He came to embrace the whole of life as real people face it. So that in him real people could triumph over it. So Jesus was born in Bethlehem to a poor couple temporarily made homeless by powerful political forces.

"... an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'" (Matthew 2:13) The infant Jesus narrowly escaped the massacre that was to follow. We do well to remember that the world into which he came was hard and cold. To remember that background is to savor even more the goodness of the Good News. Our faith does not tell us to skim lightly over the surface of life, clinging to slappy, happy hopes which have no real substance. It does not give us warm feelings which we can wrap up and put away with the Christmas ornaments. Our Faith is in the God whose Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He lived in the flesh and blood world where blood is often spilled, where bad things happen, where our bodies wear out and we die. In him we see the real presence of the One who made the world, and what we see is a wonderful outpouring of Love. What we know is that nothing can ever really overpower this Love. It may appear weak to our eyes as he dies a tortured death on a cross, but he is alive and in charge! The innocent children of Bethlehem may not have been rescued, but their vindication is at hand. Earlier centuries of Christians saw

them as heroic witnesses (martyrs) of the faith. In the modern day rewrite of the collect for Holy Innocents' there is a bold acknowledgment that these innocent "martyrs" ultimately sound the death knell for the tyrannies and systems and powers which do harm.

It is in the face of Jesus that we see "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." His light draws us to him just as it drew the Magi from the east who followed the star. Those searchers did not in the end find a dream world, but a mother and child in the real world. "***And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.***" (***Matthew 2:12***) They knew enough about life's cruel realities to try at least to prevent evil happening. They could not, as it turned out, prevent the massacre - but they tried. We followers of the Light still see it that way. We need to try. The call of our Christian life is to be the kind of people who allow the Light of Christ to shine through our words and our actions. As Jesus was revealed to us in his baptism as the Son of God, we are claimed in baptism as God's own sons and daughters by adoption and grace through Jesus. Because of that we can not contrive or pretend to be out of the real world. Instead we are invited to embrace the world that God made and that he loves.

Tyrants and tyrannical systems have had their day. We do not shrink in fear from them any longer. Those who live in the freedom of Jesus Christ can walk with confidence. The world we live in may not be pretty, but, because God is in it, it is beautiful. If the beauty of God calls us to anything, it is to the justice and mercy, the love and the peace of his promised kingdom. As the new year begins we each and all together need to figure out what we can do to bring the Light of Christ to bear on the worn out world of sorrow and dislocation. In Camden our kids are dying - in a lot of different ways. Our churches have been talking about throwing them a "lifeline." We need some flesh and blood on those skeletal hopes and dreams. The bad things - violence, crime, and despair - won't end over night, but as wise men and women we can at least take action that may help.

May Christmas and Epiphany be times of re-commitment for you.

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