

Holy Innocents, Martyrs 12/31/ 17
Matthew 2:13-18

A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND LOUD LAMENTATION, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY ARE NO MORE.

“He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him” (Jn 1:11). That’s what the Apostle John tells us about Jesus and that’s what the Feast of Holy Innocents teaches us.

Matthew relates how after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Wise Men from the East arrived in the capital city of the Jews, Jerusalem. They were searching for the newborn King of the Jews. A star had announced the birth of this King to them, and now they had come to worship Him.

But, King Herod, vicious and jealous, suffered no rivals. Herod, who drowned his 16-year-old brother-in-law; killed his uncle, aunt, and mother-in-law; his own two sons and some 300 officials he accused of siding with his sons.

It is interesting to note that the Evangelist Matthew tells us that it was not merely wicked Herod who was troubled at this news of the one born King of the Jews, but “all Jerusalem with him” (Mt 2:3). The wise men want to know where the King of kings, that Prince of Peace, was. They knew of Him because of Daniel, who lived and prophesied in their country. And, they have more than Daniel, they also have Moses. From Moses, they have Balaam’s promised sign of a star. They have seen it fulfilled and, with faith, they come to worship the One the star announced.

But, it seems they do not have all the promises of the Old Testament about the Messiah. They do not have Micah’s promise to Bethlehem. But

it is not great mystery for those who do. When the Wise Men appear, Herod inquired of the chief priests and scribes where the Christ was to be born and they answered “Bethlehem of Judea.” (Mt 1:5).

What is truly interesting is that none of these men, who know the Scriptures, followed the Wise Men to worship Christ in Bethlehem. No, rather, Matthew tells us they are “troubled” along with Herod. They are not rejoicing; they are raging and plotting. So Herod lashes out with Satanic hatred and violence, and the boys of Bethlehem bear the brunt.

December 28th is the actual date of The Holy Innocents. The Holy Innocents seems to be part of the Christmas narrative that is, more often than not, overlooked. I decided we would observe it this Sunday for two reasons.

First, The Feast of Holy Innocents teaches us how much Satan hates children. I once had a class with Dr. Louis Brighton, and Dr. Brighton taught us that Satan hates all children, because every child is a reflection of the Christ Child. Go back to the Garden, for a moment, My Friends in Christ. God gave the first promise of a Savior, and how did He declare to Satan that the Savior would come? The offspring, the Seed, of a Woman. Satan was kept in fear and trepidation century after century, wondering at the birth of every baby boy if this was the Promised Seed who would crush His head. And so, Satan unleashes his wrath and anger and fury on children.

Of course, he does it most obviously in abortion today. I will say it again: the number of children aborted in Fargo, ND, each week is equal to the average size of a kindergarten class in North Dakota. And you say to that, Dear Christian, “Ho hum. Doesn’t affect me. Not my bailey wick.” OK. Let me run it by you this way, then: What if a kindergarten class was

killed in Fargo, ND. Just one. What would you feel? What if the civil authorities passed a law that said we will kill 15-20 residents of Cass County each week? Would you say, “Well, I don’t live in Cass County, not going to affect me. There’s too many people in Fargo, anyway?” What if the civil authorities of North Dakota passed a law that said we will kill 15-20 Jews each week? What if the civil authorities said we will kill 15-20 Lutherans – Lutherans of any stripe – each week? What would you feel then, Dear Child of God?

There is another reason we celebrate The Holy Innocents – this feast teaches us the cost of following Christ. We do well to heed the words of Jesus, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master” (Mt 10:24). Baptized and living in Jesus, everything of the Master’s is ours, including His enmity with the world. Remember, “He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him” (Jn 1:11). They did not receive Jesus; much less will this world receive us who confess His holy name. In His earthly life, Jesus endured poverty, contempt, and persecution. We can expect no less. We are strangers here, and yet, the very thought of that makes us uncomfortable. We are in the world, but not of the world; yet how often do we allow the world to squeeze us into its mold? How often we find ourselves loving the things of this world, more than Jesus?

This is the life we live every day. And, we find ourselves wondering -- Where is the peace pronounced by angels to the shepherds in their fields? Where is God’s good will toward men?

There, in Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem, our newborn King.

It is He who fulfills Hosea’s prophecy, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Mt 2:15). He is that Lamb led to the slaughter, but that slaughter will only come at the appointed time. He will respond to Herod’s violence even as

He will to Caiaphas and Pilate, with humility. He will submit to their violence, but only because He willingly lays down His life; no one takes it from Him, He lays His life down of His own accord (cf. Jn 10:18).

For the Life He lived He lived for us, the death He died He died for us, and the Resurrection to which He rose, He rose for us. All of this because “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; [and] this was the Lord’s doing” (Mt 21:42).

Like our Lord Christ, we are called out of the Egypt of slavery to sin and the land of death, for in the new birth of our baptism, we are raised from sin and death to live a new life in Christ. Living in our Lord Christ, we have been freed from sin and its wages of death. We are no longer slaves to sin. Rather, we live like Christ, to do our Father’s will, as we have learned it in the 10 Commandments.

For example, the 5th Commandment teaches us that we are not to end the life of our neighbor or our own life. So, we heed the words of the book of Proverbs, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Pro 31:8-9).

And, we remember the 1st Commandment. If God in His mercy, should send you sorrow, toil, or woe; if pain should attend you; if and when God works to make you see that you are weak; then, in Christ Jesus, and only in Christ and always in Christ, God will make you strong. Remember we walk by faith, neither by sight nor the emotions of the moment. God strengthens our faith in His good and gracious will in hearing His Word and eating and drinking Christ’s body and blood, so that even in the midst of things we cannot understand, we “trust in the ORD with all your heart, and no not lean on your own understanding” (Pro 3:5).

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs, makes us pause this Christmastide and cherish the words of St. Paul, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Ro 8:18).