

INI

Matthew 2,1-23

Second Sunday After Christmas — 4 January 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew, which was read earlier:

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the Magi.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: At least a few decades ago, some well intentioned individuals posed a catchy question: “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Of course, their idea of “enough evidence” put the stress on outward piety, that is to say, had you done enough “good works” to qualify for persecution? Now there is nothing wrong with that, but history shows that outward piety was not usually the basis upon which Christians were persecuted. The basis was personal confession. This is the same kind of confession which we say every week in the words of the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed. “I believe” is the basis for persecution — it has been since the time of Christ and is still so today.

In the Church Year, today we direct our thoughts about those male infants in Bethlehem who were victims of the murderous rage of King Herod. They are called “The Holy Innocents.”

But what does the term, “Holy Innocents” mean?

Does it mean that because they were children they were innocent of being able to commit sin? No. The Scripture clearly teaches that all people, even children, are born with original sin, the sin inherited from our first parents Adam and Eve. Paul says, “through one man sin entered into the world, and death spread through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” (Rom 5,12)

They were innocent because they were not guilty of what Herod suspected them of being, that is, of being Jesus. But in another sense, they were surely slaughtered for Jesus’ sake.

How is this possible? Does it still happen today? Do it seem unfair that Jesus and the Holy Family seemingly got a “pass” on this horrific incident?

This brings me to today’s sermon topic: **“The Holy Innocents — Victims Of The Rage Against Jesus.”** I’ll develop this topic in three parts:

- 1) Herod’s Murderous Rage;**
- 2) The Holy Family Flees; and,**
- 3) The Rage Against Jesus Continues.**

1) Herod’s Murderous Rage. The Magi, those “Wise Men” from the East, had caused all Jerusalem to become discombobulated by asking, “Where is He Who is to be born the King of the Jews?”

Probably the least happy person in Jerusalem was King Herod himself. Why would Herod have been unhappy?

Well, for starters, he was the king. He would not have been happy to hear that a potential rival had been born. To secure his place on the throne, he had already killed two sons (potential rivals) and would kill a third shortly before his death. He had also killed one of his wives (he went through five of them). He had plans to pass on the kingship to his surviving sons, and none of them met the description of some potential

upstart born in Bethlehem.

Herod was also insecure. In spite of lavishing money on rebuilding the temple, Herod was part Idumean, which meant that he was not a 100 percent Jewish. He was hated by the Jewish religious authorities and he reciprocated the feeling.

A person did not get to keep the kingship by being a nice person. A king had to do what kings had to do. Herod had a reputation for being cruel and quickly disposing of all enemies, real or imagined (in his case, the real ones outnumbered the imaginary ones).

Thus, when he heard about the birth of this unnamed “King of the Jews,” he asked the Magi to tell him where they found Him so that later Herod could also go to worship at His feet. Herod, however, did not want to worship the newborn Jesus but kill Him and eliminate Him as a potential rival.

But God warned the Magi not to return to Herod after they had found Jesus, but to go back to their own country by another way.

How did Herod know that the Magi were not returning to him? Perhaps he had spies follow them. Perhaps after a few days he realized they were not coming back to him.

He was furious.

He sent soldiers to kill all the male infants who were two years of age or younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding area — Herod was not going to take any chances and miss anyone. He did not get to be king or keep his kingship by being foolish.

This is pretty awful. For Herod, however, it was the cost of doing business.

So, how many children might have died on account of Herod’s insecurity? Bethlehem was a small village, probably having a population of no more than 1,500 or 2,000. The surrounding area was not heavily

populated. With that kind of population, demographers have calculated that the population of males who were two years or age or younger would probably not have been more than a dozen or two. Thus, while the slaughter is keeping with Herod's character, the number of those killed did not rate a mention by the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (but then again, he didn't mention Jesus' crucifixion either).

As awful as this was, God had not left those who were slaughtered without some hope. After all, God had not caused their deaths. Herod, who rebelled against God's promise of a Savior, and was consumed by rage, had them killed.

As Jews, they would have been circumcised on the eighth day according to God's Word. For the Old Testament, this was a sign of God's covenant, a covenant that looked to God's promise of a Savior. It was a sign of faith and trust in God's promise.

But there was wailing and weeping, and well there might have been at lives cut short by a tyrant's order.

Matthew rightly saw in this a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, that Rachel wept because her children are no more. Rachel wept over the destruction of God's people being carried into exile. The invader tried to destroy and scatter God's people, but God still had the last word.

In the next verse in Jeremiah, the Lord offers a word of comfort.

“Restrain your voice from weeping,
And your eyes from tears;
For your work shall be rewarded,” declares the LORD,
“And they shall return from the land of the enemy.” (Jeremiah 31,16)

God's Word is more powerful than death and His Word promises restoration and redemption for the faithful.

But before the sword fell in Bethlehem,

2) The Holy Family Flees. God warned Joseph in a dream to flee Herod's wrath. And so under the cover of darkness, Joseph took the Baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary and fled to Egypt.

Does this mean that Jesus and His family got a free pass from persecution? Hardly!

Jesus was born in the same manner as the Jewish children who had been slaughtered. Jesus was born of a woman and born under the Law. Jesus also would have been circumcised on the eighth day in accord with God's command and His promise, a circumcision in which He first shed His blood for our redemption.

But Jesus was born of a woman and born under the Law, but with a purpose — and as we heard in our Epistle lesson for Christmas Day, “to redeem those under the Law.”

His and His family's flight was but temporary. They soon would return to settle in Nazareth, in region around Lake Galilee. There Jesus would grow up, “increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2,52).

At about age 30, Jesus would begin His public ministry. After three years of doing good, of healing the sick, casting out demon, raising people from the dead, and proclaiming God's Word, Jesus would pay the ultimate sacrifice for our redemption by going to the Cross for our sins.

Of Jesus, the high priest would say, “it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11,50). For those in power, it is always expedient that Jesus should die.

But die He did. During His public ministry, there were times when the authorities were ready to capture Him and put Him to death, but until that final Good Friday, His “time had not come” (John 7,30). In Bethlehem, His time was not yet at hand. On Good Friday, it had come.

It had come so that as the new Israel Who had been called out of

Egypt, Jesus could bring about the final exodus through death so that the power of sin, death, and the devil would be broken. He rose victorious from the grave on the third day to give that victory to all who would believe in His name. God's Old Testament promises had been fulfilled and confirmed in Jesus.

And yet,

3) The Rage Against Jesus Continues. Jesus did not get a free pass by fleeing to Egypt. His followers throughout the ages do not get a free pass either. During His ministry, Jesus made it perfectly clear what the cost was for those whom He calls:

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.... If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also.
(John 15,18 & 20)

In the midst of persecution, however, Jesus does not leave us without comfort or hope. He said:

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets before you. (Mt 5,10-12)

Herod had it wrong. Herod sought to kill Jesus because he thought that Jesus would be a threat to his earthly kingdom. But later Jesus said "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18,36)

But Herod, and all earthly rulers after him, also had it right. It is difficult to tolerate anyone whose ultimate loyalty is to He Who rewards faithfulness with an eternal, heavenly reward. It is difficult to tolerate anyone who does not bow the knee to an earthly ruler but instead in cases of clear conflict, confesses as Peter confessed, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5,29)

The early Christians chose to obey God rather than men when they were asked to sacrifice to the emperor as if he were a god. In an age when people worshiped many gods, what was a pinch of incense worth? To the early Christians it was worth their souls and they paid the price.

Throughout the ages it has ever been thus.

Our Lutheran forebears paid the price by remaining true to our confession rather than suffer the imposition of a false confession that would have denied original sin, denied baptismal regeneration, denied Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper, denied that Baptism and the Lord's Supper really forgive sin, diminished Christ's true humanity, and so forth. They suffered persecution, the loss of jobs, and many went into exile.

The twentieth century has been termed the bloodiest in history as far as persecution of Christians is concerned. Stalin's Soviet Union saw the destruction of churches and the murder and imprisonment in the gulag of priests and believers. Hitler expressly said that after he had finished with the Jews he would go after the Christians.

In Communist countries such as Vietnam, Christians are actively persecuted.

In Muslim countries the punishment for converting to Christianity is death. Even those born as Christians need not do anything more than walk in their Baptism to qualify for persecution, as evidenced by the beheading of three Christian girls in Indonesia as they walked to school.

Persecution of Christians in India by Hindus and by Muslims in Asian and African countries is so routine that it does not make our news unless something really awful happens – such as Boko Haran in Nigeria and surrounding countries.

And I haven't even touched on the gentle intolerant tolerance that Christians experience in North America and Europe. Thus, so often the call for tolerance means the suppression or mockery of Christianity.

Conclusion: The Holy Innocents are stark reminders of what God’s people have always faced and continue to face.

What evidence was needed to justify their slaughter? The name of Jesus. And so it continues.

What is God’s reaction? The Psalmist puts it well when he writes:

The kings of the earth take their stand,
And the rulers take counsel together,
Against the LORD and against His Anointed [or, Messiah];
³ “Let us tear their fetters apart,
And cast away their cords from us.
⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs,
The LORD scoffs at them. (Psalm 2,2-4)

God has the last word, the eternal word. For Jesus’ sake, He gathers His children of faith and promises them an eternal, heavenly reward. A reward, a crown of life, that will shine forever, just as He who is our Savior and Life, Jesus, lives forever. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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