

The Feast of the Holy Innocents, A ✕ D 2008

Matthew 2:13-18 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, 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." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." ¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 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."

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Silent night? Hardly. The night skies of Bethlehem, which once rang with the sound of babies crying, including the cry of the Baby Jesus, now ring with the cries of mothers, weeping over their slaughtered babies.

2 This is no accident that the Feast of the Holy Innocents falls three days after Christmas. The church designed it that way. The three days after Christmas are privileged feasts, celebrated over the Sundays after Christmas when they fall on a Sunday. On the second day of Christmas, December 26, the Church gives to you the Feast of St. Stephen. You remember Stephen: he was stoned to death, the first willing martyr in the New Testament, for preaching that Jesus was the promised Messiah. The last words from his mouth before he fell dead were words of absolution for his murderers: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." On the third day of Christmas, December 27, the Church gives to you the Feast of St. John the Evangelist. While John never was martyred for his faith, he was arrested and sent into exile on the island of Patmos, unable to help the church where he was bishop during the midst of persecution. And on the fourth day of Christmas, today, December 28, the Church gives to you the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the two-year-old-and-younger babies in Bethlehem Herod had slaughtered to prevent the Infant King from usurping Herod's throne. Blood and death, exile and loneliness, and more blood and death. For millennia, the Church has celebrated the second, third, and fourth days of Christmas with the stark reality of martyrdom.

3 Herod is as wicked as he is mad. Hearing from the Magi that the long-awaited King of the Jews was born in Bethlehem, Herod feared for his position. He was the king of the Jews, and no prophesied baby would snatch his prestige away from him. So Herod, looking after only his own self-interest, had all the boy babies in Bethlehem slaughtered. His self-preservation is no different from that of the thousands of mothers and fathers every day who choose to have their pre-born babies slaughtered to preserve their position. Nor is Herod's sin different from the self-preservation of every parent who secretly, even if only for a moment, longs for the

comfort of times before children. So probably fifteen to twenty babies in Bethlehem died by Herod's sword; roughly 50,000 Illinois babies a year die by the abortionist's scalpel; and every human being has to contend against his neighbor's selfishness and self-preservation. Repent.

4 So what of these babies? Was Christmas a joke, a pretense of celebration, a vain ruse to mask the pain and discomfort of real life? These mothers knew no joy from the birth of the Christ child, especially as Herod's soldiers marched away from their little town. In fact, Christmas morning joy is only a small part of the story. If this was the first Christmas without a dear loved one, you know the pain of these weeping women. Those who only appear in church on Christmas and Easter misunderstand the nature of the Church. She exists not only to remind you of the joy of Christmas when things are comfortable, but also to remind you of the joy of Christmas when life is painful, when you've lost a child or a spouse, when you've lost your job or your house, when the doctor delivers bad news, when sin's consequences sting.

5 What do you say to Rachel? She's the wife of Jacob, the wife he labored fourteen years to marry, who spent nearly all of her life childless. Finally, the Lord opened her womb, and she bore two children for Jacob: Joseph and Benjamin. But she died while giving birth to Benjamin. And when the Lord punished all of Israel for its sinful rebellion by destroying them with the Assyrian army and carrying them into exile, the prophet Jeremiah makes Rachel's voice and her weeping symbolize the weeping of all Israel. So Rachel's weeping becomes a sign for these women of Bethlehem who weep and wail when their babies are killed. What do you say to comfort Rachel? And Rachel's weeping is a sign for the weeping of everyone who has lost a loved one to the consequence of sin: death. What do you say to the husband who just spent his first Christmas morning without his wife? What do you say to the mothers, scarred by their decision to abort their babies? What do you say to the friend who lost his job? What do you say to the one whose Christmas isn't as joyful as the fairy-tale carols make you think it should be? Anything you can say to Rachel seems superficial and trite.

6 These Bethlehem babies shed their blood for the sake of the Baby Christ. They were the first, but they wouldn't be the last. The Baby in whose stead they died grew up to say, "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword" (Mt 10:34). And He would say to His disciples, "Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (Jn 16:2). That's the risk of association with this Baby in a manger, the infant Christ: death.

7 But Herod cannot win. Not only did He fail to kill the King whom he feared, but he failed to preserve his throne and his position. Herod died. All his self-preservation failed. So will yours. Death is unavoidable.

8 Rachel's weeping for her children would have continued forever until her weeping became Mary's weeping. The Son of Bethlehem would not die in Bethlehem, but He came to die. Herod could not take His life, but He came to give His life. The boys of Bethlehem, the Holy Innocents, would shed their blood for Him because He came to shed His blood for them. All of Rachel's tears are nothing like the tears of her who wept at the foot of the Cross as her Son hung dying.

9 Because of the death of the Son of God, all your weeping will stop. Rachel will be comforted, and so will you. You whose sins have earned your own death, you whose hearts have wished death or ill on another, you whose eyes are red from weeping, have comfort in this Crucified Savior. That's Christmas joy, and that's why the Church has pinned these seemingly-tragic days to the day most want to convert into superficial celebration. Christmas, the Nativity of the Lord Jesus, brings joy into joylessness because the Savior was born to save you from sin and death. For those who have faith in this Savior to deliver them from sin and death, death is no tragedy. In fact, the Church, by hanging the red of martyrdom next to the white of Christ's nativity, wants you to rejoice in the death of the saints. What do you say to Rachel? Your children will live again. Those who have died in faith now rest from their labors. They are with Christ, awaiting His return. Weep not Mary, your Son has risen. And through faith in Him, your children innumerable will rise

10 Weep not, Rachel. Your sins and your children's sins are paid for by the Baby born in Bethlehem. Herod's sword cannot kill eternally. You have already died. Your old sinful self, with all the sins you have committed or will commit was slaughtered in the waters of Holy Baptism and raised to life from those waters. And He who shed His blood for the boys of Bethlehem and for you gives you that precious Blood today. Drink His holy Blood. It forgives your sins and comforts your weeping.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Pastor Jeff Hemmer
Hope, Jerseyville