

Holy Innocents

The Rev. Dr. Al Starr

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Eight days ago we came together as a community of believers to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord, or the Birthday of Christ, commonly called Christmas Day.

As we pause to look at our liturgical calendar, we see very clearly that Christmas supplies the elements necessary for Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Since Christmas Day, we have marked the death of Saint Stephen, the first martyr of the Church, we paid homage to Saint John, who spent much of his life in exile, and we commemorated the martyrdom of Saint Thomas of Canterbury.

There was also another day of profound sorrow that we were summoned to remember just days after Christmas.

That grim reminder was the massacre of the Holy Innocents. These precious babes gave their blameless lives for the King whom they had never known.

Like little lambs, they died for the sake of the Lamb, the prototypes of a long procession of martyrs—these children who never struggled, but were crowned.

In the Circumcision, Christ shed His own blood; now His coming heralds the shedding of the blood of others for His sake.

As circumcision was the mark of the Old Law, so persecution would be the mark of the New Law.

The very entrance door over the stable where He was born was marked with blood, as was the threshold of the Jews in Egypt.

Innocent lambs in the Passover bled for Him in eternity past; now innocent children without spot, little human lambs, bled for Him. The presence of such venerated martyrs in close proximity to the birth of Jesus reminds us that Christ himself was born to die.

We stand within the Octave of the Holy Innocents and, therefore, my sermon shall be presented in honor of these precious little ones who gave their spotless lives for our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I speak to you this morning in the ✠ Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was a time when Herod the Great ruled as King of the Jews under Roman support for some 33 years. In a rogue's gallery of monsters, he surely would rank at the very top of the list.

The ancient historian Josephus gives us a brief glimpse into the wretched and twisted mind of the tyrant. He had 45 of his political rivals executed and he arranged for the drowning of his 17 year old son-in-law.

He shackled his mother-in-law and later had her murdered. He also executed one of his earlier wives and a brother-in-law.

If that wasn't enough, he deemed it necessary within his own twisted and tormented mind to have three of his sons executed; two of them by strangulation.

Outside of Saint Matthew's gospel, we have no other autonomous summary of Herod's horrific decree that day to slaughter the innocent male children.

The story therefore begs telling and retelling—for we must never forget the uncorrupted blood which issued forth that terrible day.

The wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, some six miles from Bethlehem, seeking the newborn King of the Jews. The Magi reported to Herod the appearance of a star signaling this awesome birth.

The political and religious authorities of Jerusalem didn't even have a clue that the King of Kings lay in a lowly manger, just a mere six miles distant.

The Magi were directed by the priests to Bethlehem, the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah. Herod asked the Magi to return to him and bring back details of the child for he too “wanted to worship the newborn babe.”

Inquiries about religion do not produce the same results in all hearts. What men ask about Divinity is never as important as why they ask it.

But Herod, in a fit of jealous rage, driven by all forces and designs of the Evil One, dispatched his soldiers to perform the grisly task.

Herod was fearful that He who came to bring a heavenly crown would steal away his own earthly one.

He pretended that he wanted to bring gifts, but the only gift he wanted to bring was death. How can we even begin to imagine the horror and carnage of that day?

Without a doubt, many infants were snatched from their mothers' loving arms and put to death. Others, perhaps at play or sleep, callously, cowardly torn away and savagely butchered.

My heart goes out to not only those poor innocent babes, but also to their mothers. Picture them in their agony—weeping, screaming, but to no avail.

Saint Matthew uses a quotation from the prophet Jeremiah to forever memorialize the bloodshed wrought on that day:

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachael weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

In giving birth to Benjamin, Rachael died in childbirth near the city of Bethlehem. She has become the enduring symbol for all women who would undergo the travail of childbirth or for those who would lose a child.

They could surely understand her grief for there is no greater grief than that of a mother who loses a child. No other!

Our blessed Lord escaped Herod's bloodthirsty edict through God's warning to Joseph in a dream. The Holy Family would flee to Egypt. Instead of Jesus, all of the baby boys in Bethlehem were sacrificed.

Therefore the Church regards these innocent children to be the first to die for Christ because they literally died in His place.

It is this God-King that the Innocents by dying confess. Their passion is the very exaltation of Christ!

And some thirty years or so later, our blessed Savior would willingly give HIS life and shed HIS innocent blood for all of us.

Christ's triumph over death is the most conclusive proof of His divinity and the foundation of our faith.

As Saint Paul so powerfully writes in First Corinthians: "If Christ be not risen again, your faith is in vain." (I Cor 15).

When we look at the crucifix as we approach the altar of God to find sustenance in the sacrament of his precious Body and Blood, we shall be eternally strengthened—and let us forever give voice to those who cannot speak—all of God's Holy Innocents.

In the ✠ Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.