

protecting the new-born

a sermon preached on the

feast of the holy innocents

28 December 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Jeremiah 31:15-20; Psalm 124; 1 John 1:5-2:2; Matthew 2:13-18

Apparently only Matthew the evangelist knows the story which gives today's feast its name. The Magi have offered their gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child, and departed – having been warned in a dream to return to their country by another road.¹ Then “the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, and 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.’”² For Herod was enraged, and “he sent and killed all the male children in an around Bethlehem who were two years old or under”³.

Thankfully, Joseph was man enough to pay attention to dreams!

This is the Christmas story not told in Myer and in December Christmas pantomimes. But the church in its wisdom retains Holy Innocents as a feast day just three days after Christmas. I imagine it's a story with shocking resonance for the mothers of the 132 children massacred in the Peshawar school – and the countless other unnamed and hidden places on earth where children are sacrificed on the high altars of (usually masculine) power and control.

In Matthew's story ‘Emmanuel’, God with us, has been revealed in Bethlehem of Judea⁴ – Jesus the Messiah,⁵ who will save his people.⁶ A great a joyous event – cause for worship and the bearing of precious gifts. And yet the response of Herod the king is murderous. In the glimpses we do catch in the pantomimes, Herod does appear as jealous – fearful, guarding his territory and power. But Matthew paints a picture much more lethal and shocking than the slightly humorous take in the children's shows.

The extreme lethal brutality of the execution of all male children two years or under cannot but remind us of the many lethal brutalities down the centuries – and into the present day. Herod is leaving no stone unturned to ensure that this alleged Messiah could pose no threat to him. But, ultimately, Herod cannot succeed. He is only thwarted in this by the gift to Joseph of a dream – and Joseph's taking it seriously enough.

So in this uniquely Matthean story we see that the manifestation of Emmanuel, God with us – precipitates an extreme negative reaction. Though the new-born child elicits in the Magi a willingness to a dangerous and arduous gift-bearing journey of worship and adoration, the reigning power breaks out in lethal rage.

Now as the great biblical scholar Raymond Brown observed some decades ago, the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke tell the entire gospel, ‘in little’ – and the infancy narratives only make sense when read not as historical documents, but as theological reflections on Easter faith.⁷

Thus, Emmanuel is initially welcomed enthusiastically. In the first instance there is the intuitive realisation that this is the path of the new humanity. But it soon becomes clear that the birth of the Emmanuel threatens the power of the existing status quo. And so the negative reaction. Later, the gospel will expose this same dynamic in crowds who initially respond positively to Jesus – but who then become lethal.

We can readily recognise Matthew's Herod motif in the history of the church. From the very beginning of the church, Jesus offered to people a new way of living – an easy yoke, a light burden.⁸

¹ Matthew 2:12

² Matthew 2:13

³ Matthew 2:16

⁴ Matthew 1:23

⁵ Matthew 1:18

⁶ Matthew 1:21

⁷ Raymond Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1978, p3ff

⁸ Matthew 11:30

But within decades the fledgling church was creating new rules and regulations – and inventing new ways of casting out people those who didn't fit.

And then in every era of the church there have been new births – new and liberating developments of the Spirit. The great tragedy of the 16th century reformations would be precisely this: that Martin Luther's spiritual breakthrough was so quickly met with ever-increasing rules and regulations. The liberating freedom of 'justification by faith alone' so quickly became Protestant moral puritanism, social control, and brutal coercion. And there was a terrible slaughter! Many thousands of holy innocents sacrificed to the religious Herods.

Likewise, many people consider that the 1960s Second Vatican Council represents the birth of something entirely new and liberating. Yet within the decade the windows and doors which had been so wonderfully opened were being nailed shut by the status quo – fearful Herod power reacting violently to the birth of the new. Many prophetic voices silenced by legalistic ecclesial machinery.

Lest we might feel smug, we Anglicans can see something similar within our international communion. The liberating developments of the 60s, 70s, and 80s – theological, liturgical, and ethical liberations, for women and gays in particular – was met by a violent reaction which has spent the last decade or so attempting to take the Anglican Communion back to puritan certainty and order. This new birth was too threatening for the Herods. I suspect that a very large number of people have been driven out of the Anglican church during the last decade. And as open-minded, open-hearted people have left, the concentration of puritan legalists and literalists has increased.

Herod, it must be remembered, is primarily a metaphor for deep-seated fear – for a kind of primitive anxiety which accompanies loss of control – a deeply regressive tendency. And as Matthew's story shows us, Herod gives the outer impression of wanting to pay homage to the new birth – while in fact harbouring lethal intent. Herods often smile like white pointer sharks. Thankfully, the Magi are wise enough to detect Herod's duplicity.

Reflection on Easter faith could hardly be clearer in today's gospel story. There is a terrible price to pay for the new development. Jesus will proclaim an entirely new way of being human – grounded not in law and purity, but in grace and love. And the status quo will murder him. Holy Innocent blood will be shed.

But the good news is that – no matter how apparently successful Herod may be – the new development will be protected by dreams and angels. Resurrection faith declares that – in spite of the lethal regression and the high price of the evolution in human consciousness – Herod cannot ultimately stop the Divine birth-giving.

And while all this can be observed in biblical and church history, it's the birth of God in the human soul which is really the heart of the matter – and the most readily observed fact in the life of individual persons. Every person can observe the new birth – the birth of God within the cradle of our own hearts. There is a Magi response within us – adoration. And there's a Herod response – what is coming to birth in each of us may be initially welcomed, but then intensely feared as it becomes clear that our own inner status quo is threatened. Herod's fear filled, anxious and regressive reaction is as much an inner reality as an outer one. Indeed, that's where it's grounded – within the individual soul. For each of us, our spiritual path may be littered with 'holy innocents' – that potential which has been 'murdered' by our own inner Herod, our own fear and regression. It's when many individuals become taken over by their own inner Herod that lethal possession takes a hold of the collective.

And there's a Joseph response. The Christ's Mass task which can be accomplished by any person – willing to be honest and observant – is to listen attentively to the voice of the angel and our dreams, to protect the birth of the Divine child within, the new development within. It's the Joseph energy within each of us that is capable of protecting the new-born child from our own destructive Herods – until such time that those who are seeking the child's life are no longer in the ascendant,⁹ when the new development can be safely fostered and nurtured in the Nazareth of the heart.¹⁰

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⁹ Matthew 2:20
¹⁰ Matthew 2:23