

The First Sunday after Christmas and The Holy Innocents, Martyrs
St. Matthew 2:13-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Eleven days ago, you sang this wonderful hymn about the heralding angels' message to the shepherds in the field as Jesus was born:

Hail, the heavenly Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He leaves His throne on high,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth;
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,

"Glory to the new-born King!" ("Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", TLH 94:3)

Having closed the hymn on that stanza, the Church now comes to the Fourth Day of Christmas, often observed as the feast of the Holy Innocents, Martyrs. As it turns out, the Gospel appointed for Holy Innocents is the same as the one appointed for the First Sunday after Christmas in Year A. In that text, you heard:

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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:
"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."

The Prince of Peace is "born that man no more may die," and today is "celebrated" the deaths of the male children in Bethlehem two-years old and younger. Jesus' birth and the celebration thereof is marked by slaughter, there is blood on His birth.

It should come as no surprise. Where Jesus is, there sinful man knows nothing but hate. Jesus comes that you may not die, and your Old Man wants to off Him, too, because He and the Life He comes to give are a threat to your way of life. So, there's no use in thinking of yourself better or holier or more pious than Herod because you didn't kill those innocents in Bethlehem, because you think you would welcome such a one as Jesus the infant where Herod did not. Would it be any different with adult Jesus? Maybe...maybe not.

And then, to make matters worse, God sent His Son and family into Egypt to escape the tyrant's rage. Mary, Joseph, and the Christ-child uprooted from their home in Bethlehem, having just received the gold, frankincense, and myrrh from the sages, and high-tailed it off to the land of slavery. "Out of Egypt I called my Son," was of little comfort for weeping Rachel who refused to be comforted because her son is no more. "God's Son gets to live, but mine is killed in His stead. It just doesn't seem fair; it isn't right." It's little consolation, but it wasn't Jesus' time yet, even though He had just received burial spices from those sages.

Those spices, the myrrh and its "bitter perfume," that "Breathes a life of gathering gloom; Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, Sealed in the stone cold tomb," foreshadow the fact that He did come to die. So does another stanza from another Christmas hymn:

Why lies he in such mean estate

Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here
The silent word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
The cross he borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary! ("What Child is This", LSB 370:2)

First, however, He had to fulfill the Word that was written. "Out of Egypt I called My Son." Jesus had to be Israel, and so the eternal Son of God retraced the steps of His ancestor into slavery in Egypt and back out with Moses. He was the new Israel, the new Moses, the new Adam, come to do what each of them—what each of you—would not and could not do: be the perfect man in order to be the perfect sacrifice.

And as God had done centuries before, Jesus made His way out of Egypt and eventually to Jerusalem. Pillar of cloud, pillar of fire, cover of the Ark, tent in Shiloh, temple in Jerusalem, children of Israel—Jesus is all of them. He is all of you, every last bit—flesh and blood, skin and bones, sin and disease (though perfect and sinless)—borne to the altar of the cross outside of Jerusalem. There, this sacrificial Lamb shed His blood as your propitiation, and He shared in the suffering of those boys of Bethlehem and Rachel and all of Israel and all of you—He shared in suffering in a way that you cannot comprehend, for He bore it all even as He suffered under the full wrath of God for your sins and the sins of all of the world—for those boys, for Rachel, for Herod, for all of Israel, for all of you.

It might come as a shock to think that perhaps only a couple or three dozen boys were slaughtered that day in Bethlehem, if that. The City of David is a small town, the least of all the cities of Judah (cf. Micah 5:2), so it would follow that there couldn't have been very many boys two and under in the town. It was probably a quick and simple thing for Herod's men to sweep through the town and kill those boys, and hardly newsworthy in the list of Herod's atrocities—killing perceived political rivals was nothing for him. Does that make Herod's slaughter seem "no so bad after all?" As if the massacre of a few innocents is somehow better than the massacre of many.

- Well then, how about Stalin's massacre of the Ukrainians in the 1930s?
- What about Hitler's extermination of the Jews, Gypsies, and other "undesirables" in the 1940s?
- There's also the brutality shown the Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s.¹
- And these all pale in comparison, however, to the massacre that has been happening to children still in the womb, that a few are seeking to "enshrine" as a right in state constitutions (and more), including this one!

The number of innocents slaughtered for the sake of convenience—like those of Bethlehem—is staggering when added up over the decades of legalized abortion. What a horrific travesty! Dear God, what weeping of those who regret and/or mourn over having killed their child *in utero*! Does Rachel weep for these? Do you, dear hearers?

Yet even for these Jesus was conceived, born, and died. Dr. David P. Scaer wrote rather poetically,

[T]hrough the Incarnation, the Son of God shares in the life of every man, woman, and child—not only those born, but also those who are conceived and never born. The Incarnation was limited to one place, one time, and one person, but it had a universal dimension. We human beings are not a collection of individuals; we are taken out of the flesh of Adam so that we are part of one another. Christ came as the second Adam so that we could all have God in Him. By His Incarnation, the eternal *Logos* permeated all of humanity and all of humanity became part of Him.

1 Thanks to Dr. David P. Scaer's sermon dated January 21, 1989, anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, for these three bullet points.

In that one moment of incarnation and conception, the Holy Spirit brought that infinitely small cell into existence by a special action upon the Virgin Mary. At that moment, the Son of God, the Man from heaven, identified with all people who have ever been and who will ever be conceived.²

These were conceived in sin, but never had a chance to be born to a life of sin—innocent in a way you who have been born and live or those who have died since birth will never know. They were once alive, like all of you, but never born. They were never born to be washed in the waters of Holy Baptism, receiving instead a baptism of salt and a deadly issue from their mothers' wombs. Jesus was alive from the moment "the Holy Spirit brought that infinitely small cell into existence" in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and so in His life, their lives and deaths are assumed as much as yours are and those of others who knew the grace and love of being born into this fallen world.

For these innocents, for the innocents of Bethlehem, for weeping Rachel, for Herod, for Adam, for all of Israel, for all of you Jesus was conceived—assuming flesh and blood, skin and bones like all of them, like all of you—was born, and died. Jesus' blood, His death, covers a multitude of sins—the sins of the world—including the innocents of these days—for He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (cf. John 1:29)

These three days after Christmas Day are a reminder that this season is not so much about the fluff and sentimentality seen as the world fawns over the birth of an infant. The festival days of St. Stephen, St. John, and today, Holy Innocents, all come on the heels of the Nativity of Jesus, telling you that death follows following the One who was born that man no more may die. Stephen was stoned to death for preaching Jesus, a martyr in will and deed. (cf. Acts 6:8—7:50) There were attempts to take John's life, but he lived and was exiled to the island of Patmos, a martyr in will but not deed. (cf. Revelation 1:9) Today is the feast day of these boys of Bethlehem who happened to have been born at about the same time as Jesus, martyrs in deed but not will. No, Jesus wasn't born to be fawned over, but to bring death to sin and immortality and Life to light.

Still, as all the evil and perverse world cheers as the "right" to murder an innocent and unwanted life is celebrated, so all of the fallen world cheered in victory as the Son of God died, finally. Mary weeps, the Blessed Mother of God, because she cannot be comforted while she is given to John and John to her (cf. John 19:26), but she will be consoled a few days later. Her Son died for her, too, as much as Rachel's sons died because of Him some decades before. But He rose again from the grave for her, as for them, as for Rachel, as for all of Israel, as for all of the unborn innocents, as for all of you.

Death could not contain the Author of Life, and so for all of Adam's descendants the Son of God burst forth from the fetters of the grave. In Christ, the slave-master Death is a conquered enemy to you. For, here is the consolation of the world: Jesus exchanges your Death for Life, and seals it to you, giving you the victory over Death as He rises from the dead. In His death on the cross in your place, Jesus conquers this enemy and gives you the victory in this ages-long war by His resurrection from the dead. Dr. Martin Luther called this the blessed exchange, so fulfilling the Word which Jesus spoke:

- "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away." (Matthew 24:34-35)
- "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." (John 11:25-26)

Death constantly surrounds the Prince of Peace who was "born that man no more may die." But death is swallowed up in His conception, birth, life, and death. Dear Baptized, into His conception, birth, life, death, and resurrection you have been baptized—you are swallowed up in His flesh, even as He continues to bless you with His flesh and blood. In Holy Baptism, that old Adamic flesh is drowned and dies—daily, even, by contrition and repentance—and a New Man emerges that lives before God in

2 Sermon dated January 21, 1989.

righteousness and purity forever. The flesh of the New Man—your new flesh, dear Baptized—is that which was conceived and born of the Virgin Mary, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:27)

Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no life. You ought to pray and hope for the grace and mercy of God on those who were never given the chance to believe in Him, or to confess a faith in Him, the holy innocents of this time, as it were, whose very lives and death were assumed into the flesh of Jesus as much as yours were. But, even here, the Word of God consoles you, as it did for David who mourned the death of His unnamed son before he could be circumcised. (cf. 2 Samuel 12:22-23)

As for you, however, you are baptized, you confess Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and you are here to receive Jesus in faith, so you are in Christ, and you have life. Jesus has come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly (cf. John 10:10); born that *you* no more may die. Therefore, as Mary conceived the Son of God by the special action of the Holy Spirit, so in you is conceived by the special action of the Holy Spirit the faith to believe in the Son of God, your Savior, as water and the Word was applied to you, and you were born again of water and the Spirit. (cf. John 3:3, 5) You have faith to believe in Jesus, and so, you shall never die, but have life more abundant in eternity. Therefore, should you face death in this fallen world, you shall yet live forever, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.