

## **Feast of Holy Innocents**

### **Dec 27, 2015 | Patrick Preheim**

We don't often get this scripture. The Christmas pageants and Christmas readings leave this nasty business out. The death of children is unbecoming to the joy, good-will, and peace we typically associate with Christmas. So most Canadian Christians deny its place in our sacred story, its part in our country's history with the scoop of Indigenous children to Residential schools, its reality in our world today. Friends, such denial is not becoming the people of God. It is purely and simply a domestication of the Christmas story. Jesus, and those who follow after him, truly are a threat to the powers of the world and sometimes the powers will lash out. On the Catholic Calendar of Saints tomorrow, December 28, is the feast day of the "Holy Innocents". I offer you a brief reflection on this day from Catholic scholar and writer Robert Ellsberg.

It is the constant fear of every tyrant that somewhere, perhaps in an obscure village, perhaps at that very moment, there is a baby born who will one day signal the end of his power. According to the Gospel of Matthew, this fear was realized for King Herod when wandering wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"....

This terrible story...is a vivid reminder of the violent world into which Jesus was born. There were certainly those for whom the coming of the Messiah represented anything but good news. Did Jesus at some point learn the story of his birth and of the children who had perished in his place? If so, that chapter in his education is reserved for his "hidden years," beyond the scope of the Gospel narratives. From the early centuries, however, the church has commemorated the feast of these Holy Innocents. Unlike traditional martyrs who would later die bearing witness to Christ, these little ones died unwittingly in the place of Christ. They were killed by the same interests that would later conspire in the death of Jesus and for the same reasons— to stifle from birth any hope that the world might be changed.

In our own time whole villages have been massacred on the basis of similar reports: "In such-and-such-a-hamlet the peasants have formed a cooperative...It is said that in such-a-village poor families are gathering at night to read the Bible and other subversive literature...It is well known where this is likely to lead...Advise that appropriate action be taken before the danger spreads."

The feast of the Holy Innocents is not simply a memorial to those who died before their time. These infants represent all those cut down to prevent the seed of liberation from taking root and growing. They are those who die in the dream of a different future, hoping but never knowing that their redeemer lives. In remembering the feast of the Holy Innocents the church commemorates these victims of Herod's rage. But it also celebrates his failure.

His power is doomed. The child lives.

Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time*, p. 565-566

In preparing for this Sunday Allan and I were drawn to consider a choral offering written by Kurt Bestor. We will listen to that piece of music in a moment. Mr. Bestor's

background to the song is a fitting preparation to receive it (<http://kbestor.blogspot.ca/2005/09/prayer-of-children-story-behind-song.html>).

Over the years, I've written many songs with melodies more memorable, lyrics more poetic, and harmonies richer. But none of my compositions has had the kind of reach and emotional effect of *Prayer of the Children*. Ironically, I never intended to publish the song at all. I wrote it out of frustration over the horrendous civil war and ethnic cleansing taking place in the former country of Yugoslavia.

Having lived in this now war-torn country back in the late 1970's, I grew to love the people with whom I lived. It didn't matter to me their ethnic origin - Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian - they were all just happy fun people to me and I counted as friends people from each region. Of course, I was always aware of the bigotry and ethnic differences that bubbled just below the surface, but I always hoped that the peace this rich country enjoyed would continue indefinitely. Obviously that didn't happen.

When Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito died, different political factions jockeyed for position and the inevitable happened - civil war. Suddenly my friends were pitted against each other. Serbian brother wouldn't talk to Croatian sister-in-law. Bosnian mother disowned Serbian son-in-law and so it went. Meanwhile, all I could do was stay glued to the TV back in the US and sink deeper in a sense of hopelessness.

Finally, one night I began channeling these deep feelings into a wordless melody. Then little by little I added words....*Can you hear....? Can you feel.....?* I started with these feelings - sensations that the children struggling to live in this difficult time might be feeling. Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian children all felt the same feelings of confusion and sadness and it was for them that I was writing this song.

*Play "Prayer of the Children"* – A haunting hymn. A thank you to John Elias who provided this recording done by the Brigham Young University men's chorus.

Back to our story in Matthew's gospel. The narrator provides two frameworks in which the story of Jesus' early days is set. The first framework is geographical. I spoke about this a bit last week. "His journeys are not random or happenstance. In the narrative his associations with Bethlehem, Egypt, Israel, and Nazareth in Galilee disclose him as the accomplishment of Israel's destiny...

The other framework of Matt. 2, alongside the geographical one, is the figure of Herod... The story of the chapter has to do with the birth of one king and the violent opposition [and death] of another. The royal power represented by Herod from the very beginning cannot tolerate the presence of Jesus. The first word of his birth leaves Herod troubled, and when he feels helpless to find Jesus his trouble turns to furious rage. In a sense he rightly perceives the threat Jesus represents—Israel's true King, who subverts all claims to absolute authority.

The killing of the male babies has to be understood in the context of the challenge Jesus holds for Herod" (Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, James Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A*, p.71-72). It is a similar threat faced by the King of Egypt earlier in Israel's history; yes another link to Egypt. Pharaoh, too,

also ordered the execution of baby boys (Ex 1.16). We should “not be surprised at the extent to which Herod goes to get rid of Jesus. The birth of Jesus, when not encased in sentimentality and romance, represents a powerful challenge. The opposition does not sit idly by and take the news of his arrival casually. It understands that the stakes are high, and thus the response is violent and destructive. The story reminds the reader that God’s acts of peace and justice inevitably evoke a hostile response.

Herod in a sense represents the enmities that crop up throughout Jesus’ ministry, culminating in his violent death. But none of them is able to deter God’s plan in Jesus, not Herod nor any other threatened authority. The simple words “Herod died” convey the end of such powers, the end of their plotting and scheming, the end of their pretense and brutality” (Ibid). As Ellsberg noted earlier: his power is doomed, the child lives.

In working with this part of the Christmas story I found myself considering the discipleship of the text. What might Matthew be asking of us in relation to the Holy Innocents? I offer a couple of possibilities

Perhaps Jesus lived with a sense of survivor’s guilt and survivor’s responsibility. I heard this phrase while watching a news program chronicling the psychological impact of those getting out of Syria who leave family and friends behind. Maybe Jesus, at some point, heard about what happened in Bethlehem after the family left and he felt a sense of guilt at having lived when so many others died. Maybe this guilt got translated into a sense of responsibility for the children of the world. Maybe this is one reason he tells the disciples to “let the children come to me, do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs” (Matt 19.14). This would be an intriguing line to follow. How might the crises we survive become the seed bed of our passion and ministry?

Another take: I am struck by the response of the Egyptian midwives named Shiphrah and Puah who I am guessing Matthew wanted us to remember as the children of his Gospel are cut down. These two women, midwives, practiced serious civil disobedience. Out of faithfulness to God, they lied to Pharaoh so that innocent lives might be saved (Ex 1.17). Out of moral outrage they deceived the authorities which resulted in the survival of one named Moses. They had no way of knowing they were contributing to the liberation of an oppressed people a generation later. They simply did what was necessary to save innocent life. God did the rest. Was Matthew suggesting the residents of Bethlehem did the same? Good question. Maybe he was proposing that we follow the mid-wives example. Maybe we too are called to such civil disobedience.

I am also taken with the possibilities within the arts to protest grief and injustice. I preached about it this summer, but here we find it again. The cellist of Sarajevo, Kurt Bestor, and the Coventry Carol all have translated pain into an artistic demonstrations against the tyrannical machines of our world. There are souls in Creative Church right now crafting icons which break down xenophobia and racism. We sing hymns to ground ourselves and point the way. Kathy, Lorene, and Kenna have all shared music this morning (an act of discipleship) which affirms that we follow Jesus and not Herod. We are all artists who have the capacity to point others toward a reconciling God; we just do it in different ways.

Rather than talking about it, though, let us receive the offering of Kathy and Kenna to this Divine mission of God.

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Kenna sings "O Shea Shalom"