

Innocent

Saturday 28th December



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Massacre of the Innocents (c.1565 - 1567). Royal Collection, United Kingdom

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-18

When the wise men had departed, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, 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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

To reflect

The Western Church calendar marks Holy Innocents (also known as Childemas) on the fourth day of Christmastide (28th December). This is the day that commemorates the slaughter of the innocents by Herod as told in Matthew 2.16-18. Herod, feeling threatened at the birth of a baby boy which the wise men had told would be a gifted King, order the killing of all the male children under two years old in Bethlehem. The quote in the Gospel of Matthew is from Jeremiah 31.15 and there are parallels with Pharaoh's killing the Hebrew children in the Book of Exodus, when Moses survives. As a result of the threat Joseph takes the Holy Family as refugees to Egypt.

The image of the painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, is not as it was painted or intended. It is a depiction of the Massacre of the Innocents, set in the Southern Netherlands as a winter scene. However, the images of dead children were painted over on the orders of Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor. The dead and dying children have been replaced by food items and sacks of good. A ruler, a man of power, trying to eradicate people – infants and young children – that threaten their position of power. How different this is to Mary's Song of the Magnificat where the lowly will be cast down and rulers sent away empty.

Today you're invited to pray for the children of the world who are impacted by war, unrest, and violence and it's inheritance. For those who the world and nations forget or would like to paint over and not see the suffering.

To pray – A Collect for The Holy Innocents

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
whose Holy Innocents were slaughtered at the hand of Herod:
receive into the arms of your mercy, we pray, all innocent victims;
and, by your great might, frustrate the designs of evil tyrants,
and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.
Amen.

The Holy Innocents by Laurence Housman (1865 – 1959)

When Christ was born in Bethlehem,
Fair peace on earth to bring,
In lowly state of love He came
To be the children's King.

And round Him, then, a holy band
Of children blest was born,
Fair guardians of His throne to stand
Attendant night and morn.

And unto them this grace was giv'n
A Saviour's name to own,
And die for Him Who out of Heav'n
Had found on earth a throne.

O blessèd babes of Bethlehem,
Who died to save our King,
Ye share the martyrs' diadem,
And in their anthem sing!

Your lips, on earth that never spake,
Now sound th'eternal word;
And in the courts of love ye make
Your children's voices heard.

Lord Jesus Christ, eternal Child,
Make Thou our childhood Thine;
That we with Thee the meek and mild
May share the love divine.

To Listen (these and other suggestions can be found on a Spotify playlist at

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0F5bU2sf4OiOtQY3q78Rj2?si=a99cbbf61e7d4587>

- 'Coventry Carol' comes from a 16th century Mystery Play and the text retells the events of Matthew 2. One instrumental version (arr. Rimmer) is by Jess Gillam and the Jess Gillam Ensemble
- 'Vox in Rama' is a communion motet for the Feast of the Holy Innocents is the text from Matthew 2:18 (citing Jeremiah 31:15). There are several settings one is by George Kirbye, performed by the Choir of Clare College.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.