

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Second Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-third Verse of the sixth Chapter of the Book of Judges.³

“Then all the Midianites [**MIDD-ee-unn-ights**] and the Amalekites [**AMM-uh-leck-ights**] and the children of the east were gathered together, and went over, and pitched in the valley of Jezreel [**DGEZZ-reel**]. But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**], and he blew a trumpet; and Abiezer [**AY-by-ee-zurr**] was gathered after him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh [**muh-NASS-uh**]; who also was gathered after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher [**ASH-urr**], and unto Zebulun [**ZEBB-you-lunn**], and unto Naphtali [**NAFF-tuh-lee**]; and they came up to meet them.

“And Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**] said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said. And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water. And Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**] said unto God, Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: let me prove, I pray thee, but this once with the fleece; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.

“Then Jerubbaal [**dgerr-oo-BAY-ull**], who is Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**], and all the people that were with him, rose up early, and pitched beside the well of Harod [**HAY-rodd**]: so that the host of the Midianites [**MIDD-ee-unn-ights**] were on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh [**MOE-reh**], in the valley. And the LORD said unto Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**], The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midia-

nites [**MIDD-ee-unn-ights**] into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me. Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead [**GILL-ee-udd**]. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand. And the LORD said unto Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**], The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go. So he brought down the people unto the water: and the LORD said unto Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**], Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink. And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men: but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water. And the LORD said unto Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**], By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites [**MIDD-ee-unn-ights**] into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place. So the people took victuals [**VITT-ullz**] in their hand, and their trumpets: and he sent all the rest of Israel every man unto his tent, and retained those three hundred men: and the host of Midian [**MIDD-ee-unn**] was beneath him in the valley.

“And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand. But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah [**FYOO-ruh**] thy servant down to the host: And thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened to go down unto the host. Then went he down with Phurah [**FYOO-ruh**] his servant unto the outside of the armed men that were in the host. And the Midianites [**MIDD-ee-unn-ights**] and the Amalekites [**AMM-uh-leck-ights**] and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude. And when Gideon

⁴ Ruth 1:1-end (KJV).

⁵ Job 5:6-end (KJV).

⁶ St. Matthew 2:1-end (KJV).

⁷ Romans 14:10 (KJV).

⁸ I John 5:19 (KJV).

⁹ St. John 2:15-16 (KJV).

¹⁰ St. John 1:10 (KJV).

¹¹ St. Matthew 26:53 (KJV).

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[**GIDD-ee-unn**] was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian [**MIDD-ee-unn**], and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along. And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**] the son of Joash [**JOE-ash**], a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian [**MIDD-ee-unn**], and all the host. And it was so, when Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**] heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped, and returned into the host of Israel, and said, Arise; for the LORD hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian [**MIDD-ee-unn**]. And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet in every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers. And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise: and, behold, when I come to the outside of the camp, it shall be that, as I do, so shall ye do. When I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and say, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**].

“So Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**], and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon [**GIDD-ee-unn**]. And they stood every man in his place round about the camp; and all the host ran, and cried, and fled. And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host: and the host fled to Bethshittah [**beth-SHITT-uh**] in Zererath [**ZARE-ih-rath**], and to the border of Abelmeholah [**AY-bell meh-HOE-luh**], unto Tabbath [**TABB-uth**]. And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali [**NAFF-tuh-lee**], and out of

Asher [ASH-urr], and out of all Manasseh [*mu*h-NASS-uh], and pursued after the Midianites [MIDD-ee-*unn*-ights].”

Or,

Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Book of Ruth.⁴

“Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah [BETH-lih-*hem* DGOO-duh] went to sojourn in the country of Moab [MOE-abb], he, and his wife, and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech [ih-LIMB-uh-*leck*], and the name of his wife Naomi [*nay*-OH-mee], and the name of his two sons Mahlon [MAH-lahn] and Chilion [KILL-ee-*ohn*], Ephrathites [EFF-ruh-*thights*] of Bethlehemjudah [BETH-lih-*hem* DGOO-duh]. And they came into the country of Moab [MOE-abb], and continued there. And Elimelech [ih-LIMB-uh-*leck*] Naomi’s [*nay*-OH-meez] husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. And they took them wives of the women of Moab [MOE-abb]; the name of the one was Orpah [AHR-puh], and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years. And Mahlon [MAH-lahn] and Chilion [KILL-ee-*ohn*] died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

“Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab [MOE-abb]: for she had heard in the country of Moab [MOE-abb] how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread. Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters in law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah. And Naomi [*nay*-OH-mee] said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me. The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept. And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people. And Naomi [*nay*-OH-mee] said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go

over the world, the flesh and the devil? The answer is very simple. They were associated with Jesus Christ Himself. They were, in a sense, mistaken for Him, or potentially for being Him.

And, though not as Divine, but certainly as filled with charity and living a life that bears witness to the truth, we may indeed provoke the wrath of the world. I recall a bumper sticker that a friend of mine had on his car when I was in college (which was, I assure you, less than a hundred years ago). The bumper sticker said: “If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” If we provoke the wrath of this world by being like Christ, we become like the Holy Innocents.

Yes, we may choose to be Christ’s witnesses, unlike them. But, the issue that matters is never any one of us; the issue is Jesus Christ. To any degree that we may be identified with Him, indeed, in terms of our love and our deeds mistaken for Him, we are Christians. And if we bear Him witness, by life or by death, we do so as martyrs. For it is about the Truth Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ. May we all, in that proper sense, be mistaken for Christ. May there be enough evidence to convict us all.

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The Rev’d Robert Hart¹²
December 28, 2008

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Mass on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, 2011.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 39 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (CIPBC 1963).

³ Judges 6:33—7:23 (KJV).

and plans the chaos of the Fallen sons of Adam, is marked by this: They do not know the Word made flesh: That is, they do not know Jesus Christ. He could walk among them right now, and manifest His miracles, and they would not know Him. Indeed, we see that they *did not* know Him.

Not that His death was a tragedy; certainly not. He was no helpless victim, since He had power to call upon the Father for, as He said, “twelve legions of angels.”¹¹ Jesus was a hero, the ultimate hero, not a victim in the modern sense of the word. But He was the one true sacrifice for the sins of the whole world; or as we say in every Communion Service, with words that summarize much from the Epistle to the Hebrews and the First Epistle of St. John: “All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.” He did not lose His life: He *gave* His life.

When He appeared to eyewitnesses after His Resurrection, He was creating the certainty that His Church would need in all ages. And those first martyrs had no fear of death, because they bore witness of the Living Christ who has conquered death, and shall destroy it when He comes again in glory. The martyr’s crown is a crown of joy, and this does not turn our Christmas into a time of sorrow. No, not at all. But, it turns our Christmas season into a time of distinctly and decidedly *Christian* joy, a joy that the world cannot know. Whereas we must speak with the prophetic voice about evil, we do so to deliver those yet held captive by the world and its system that is based on not knowing the Lord. It is not because the martyr’s crown can be a symbol of sorrow, since it is a sign of triumph and everlasting joy.

But, back to our question. How did the Holy Innocents qualify as martyrs? What turned their deaths into a triumph

with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn again, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have an husband. If I should say, I have hope, if I should have an husband also to night, and should also bear sons; Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD is gone out against me. And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah [**AHR-puh**] kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her. And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

“So they two went until they came to Bethlehem [**BETH-lih-hem**]. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem [**BETH-lih-hem**], that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi [**nav-OH-mee**]? And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi [**nav-OH-mee**], call me Mara [**MAY-ruh**]: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi [**nav-OH-mee**], seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? So Naomi [**nav-OH-mee**] returned, and Ruth the Moabitess [**moe-uh-BITE-ess**], her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab [**MOE-abb**]: and they came to Bethlehem [**BETH-lih-hem**] in the beginning of barley harvest.”

Or,

Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Book of Job.⁵

“... Although affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground; Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward. I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause: Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number: Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields: To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety. He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise. He taketh the wise in their own craftiness: and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong. They meet with darkness in the day time, and grope in the noonday as in the night. But he saveth the poor from the sword, from their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty. So the poor hath hope, and iniquity stoppeth her mouth. Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole. He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. In famine he shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of the sword. Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue: neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh. At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh: neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth. For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. And thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace; and thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt not sin. Thou shalt know also that thy seed shall be great, and thine offspring as the grass of the earth. Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in in his season. Lo this, we have searched it, so it is; hear it, and know thou it for thy good.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁶

Mere Christianity, had to cut back a few pages of each issue a year ago, I asked James Kushiner and David Mills not to cut the the segment called “The Suffering Church,” even if cutting it would provide more room for my own articles. I am glad to report they have not cut it, and in each issue you can be informed of the persecution of our fellow Christians in other lands, especially for purposes of prayer and works that may help them and their families.

Let us recall that a martyr is a witness. A martyr is not simply a person who dies for a cause, and certainly no suicide and no terrorist can be a martyr; that is, not by the correct definition. The martyr is not marked by death, but rather the martyr is marked by the purpose for which that death was inflicted. The Greek word $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\varsigma$ (*martyrs* [**marr-TOOSE**]), from which our word “martyr” comes, means a person who testifies, a witness bearing testimony before the eyes of the world. The word has taken on the meaning of *death for a cause* only because of St. Stephen and all other Christian witnesses who have given their lives to testify to the truth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who appeared to eyewitnesses alive again after He had died on the Cross for the sins of the whole world.

Why should such witness for Christ provoke a violent and hate-filled reaction? Remember what I said about Pharaoh and Herod, that their plots were devilish. I meant that quite literally. As St. John wrote: “And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.”⁸ The Apostle and Evangelist John explained his rather curious use of the expression, “the world.” He tells us not to love the world or the things in the world, which he identifies as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.”⁹ The definition that he gives to his own special use of this phrase, “the world,” is explained simply in the prologue to his Gospel, that prologue that sets the double theme of his whole Gospel: The Trinity and the Incarnation of the Word. In that prologue, St. John says very simply: “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.”¹⁰ This spiritual system that organizes

men, abortionists, and all other assassins commit, or the deranged murders of ideological terrorists, victims include the helpless and innocent. In this way the Holy Innocents have much in common with the victims of injustice that have died in every age. And, in this country we have every reason to see the murders committed *by means of* abortion reflected in their deaths; for the aborted child, who is certainly also a victim of murder, is every bit as helpless as were these children. This is the evil not of an active government bent on extermination, but of a passive government failing to protect the sanctity of human life. Even so, the complicity is there.

Herod was a madman, and in him, as in Pharaoh Rameses II, who ordered the killing of every male child among the Hebrews, we see something devilish at work, since Christ as the Prophet like unto Moses, foretold by Moses himself, was targeted for death as soon as He was born. The warfare was, after all, cosmic, and it was spiritual, the conflict of the kingdom of God against the dominion of Satan. Against injustice the Church needs to reclaim her prophetic role in society, giving a sense of moral accounting to the whole culture. I do not say merely moral propriety, but moral accounting, since “we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”⁷

And, so then, why do we feast on the memory of such a painful and sad day? Many other madmen have ordered such mass murders to be done, and their victims do not all qualify as martyrs. What so many victims do not have in common with the Holy Innocents of Judea, is the crown of martyrdom.

And, martyrdom is not simply a part of history. There were more martyrs in the 20th century than in all previous centuries of the Church combined. The last eight years have shown no respite, no let up in these killings. In modern times Christians have been martyred for bearing witness before Communist Atheists, before Nazis, and before militant Muslims; and the numbers are staggering. And, all they have a crown of glory that awaits them. When the magazine *Touchstone, A Journal of*

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

“Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof,

from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

“But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child’s life. And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus [*ahr-kih-LAY-uss*] did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Today’s Second Lesson tells the story of the event the Church commemorates on December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. That is a Feast, the sad occasion for which seems, at first glance, to come in a rather odd series of sad occasions that occur immediately after our tremendously joyous celebration of Christmas. No sooner have we enjoyed our Christmas Mass, our Christmas dinner and whatever happy celebrations with family and friends, than we find ourselves facing the fact of martyrdom the next day, with the death of St. Stephen.

We in the Church know that day to be more than simply a song about Good King Wenceslas feeding a poor man. The feast of Stephen was never difficult for Christians to understand, inasmuch as the martyr’s crown is a crown of triumph. That is why we Christians do not fast for our martyrs; we do not

mourn. Rather, we have feast days for martyrs. And, the choice of St. Stephen to lay down his life for Jesus Christ carried with it all the marks of heroism, faith, courage and mercy as he forgave his persecutors with the same love Christ himself had demonstrated from the Cross. And, the day after that we celebrate the memory of a holy life, the life of St. John who understood charity, and who fulfilled his ministry faithfully as an Apostle, and as an Evangelist. The joy of Christmas goes on on those two days, the second and third days of Christmas, and have nothing in them that ought to seem puzzling, or even shocking.

But the Holy Innocents, the fourth day of this brief joyful season of Christmas, presents the very sad picture of cruelty and injustice, violence against the weakest and most helpless of persons, children under the age of two. They could not defend themselves, and neither could any of them choose to die bravely. Nonetheless, the Church calls that a Feast Day and does so because the slain children are recognized as martyrs. We shall have to examine why they are martyrs, and therefore why we are feasting. After all, none of these children had power to take the heroic decision that St. Stephen did. Indeed, they were given no choice and no way out (and, no doubt, many of the parents died with their children, warding off the blow of Herod’s mercenaries). So, we must use our minds to understand what the Church has taught from ancient times, and see why these helpless ones are listed among the martyrs of our Lord.

But before we do that, let us look at what these deaths have in common with others that are *not* considered to be martyrdom. Only in this way will we be able accurately to see the one crucial distinction that sets them apart from so many victims of violent injustice.

Indeed, whether it is an active government murdering the innocent after the manner of Stalin, Hitler, and many others including Sadam Hussein, using soldiers against their own people, or murder for profit and selfishness, such as Mafia hit-