

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Holy Innocents

Lessons:¹

First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.²

“At the same time, saith the Lord, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus saith the Lord, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest. The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things. For there shall be a day, that the watchmen upon the mount Ephraim shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the Lord our God.

“ ...

“Thus saith the Lord; A voice was heard in Ramah,³ lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel⁴ weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus saith the Lord; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.⁵

“At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of

them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

“And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

“Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

“Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Thus saith the Lord; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel

In the face of these horrific crimes, crimes that would be unimaginable except that they are not subjects of imagination but instead of news reports, we have no recourse except that urged on Job by Elihu. We must fear God, trust in His providence, and pray that even in these awful situations, His will shall be done.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹³
December 28, 2008.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928).

² Jeremiah 31:1-6, 15-16 (KJV).

³ Ramah, the city where the prophet Samuel dwelt, is here used to symbolize the Northern Kingdom of Israel after the Davidic kingdom was divided into Israel and Judah. Cf. 1 Samuel 8:4.

⁴ "Rahel" is Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, who here symbolizes the lament of the Hebrew people over the division of their nation into two separate, often opposed, kingdoms. Thus Ramah becomes a poetic allusion to any cause of unusual sorrow. Verse 16, and especially Verse 17 (which does not form part of the appointed passage) offer hope in their declaration that this division will one day be healed.

⁵ St. Matthew 18:1-14 (KJV).

⁶ Jeremiah 31:15 (KJV).

⁷ St. Matthew 2:16-18.

⁸ St. Luke 23:40-43.

⁹ St. Luke 13:2b-5a (RSV).

¹⁰ E.g., Job 4:7-9 and 8:3-4.

¹¹ Job 5:17-18.

¹² Job 37:23-24.

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weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not."⁶

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Today, we commemorate Herod's slaughter of the young children in the region of Bethlehem. This followed the visit of the three Magi, who told him of the prophecy that a child born in that place would be the King of Israel. Fearing that this unknown child would replace him as the secular ruler, he ordered the murder of all children in the district who were of the approximate age indicated by the visitors from the East.

In the New Testament, only St. Matthew reports this event,⁷ which is unnoticed by other historians of the period such as Josephus [**Joe-SEE-fuss**]. This absence of confirming accounts has led some to doubt whether this massacre ever in fact took place. Others, however, noting that it was consistent with the historic Herod's known propensity to eliminate all possible competitors for power, have speculated that St. Matthew's brief passage is actually a possibly garbled reference to Herod's well-documented murder of his own children to prevent their challenging his rule.

Theme:

Herod's murder of the innocent children, whether they were part of the population of the Bethlehem district or whether they were his own offspring, was a precursor of the murder thirty-some years later of the innocent child whose birth in Bethlehem we celebrate during this Christmas season.

Just as these children had done nothing that could have legitimately incurred their deaths, but only died because of the happenstance of where and when they were born, so, too, as the so-called “Good Thief” observed to his partner in crime,⁸ Our Lord did nothing to deserve death. Instead, from the secular standpoint rather than the theological one, He was murdered solely because He stood at a critical juncture in the complex interplay of Roman imperial and Jewish nationalistic politics.

Development:

1. **Evils such as the slaughter of the Innocents always raise the difficult problem of “theodicy” [THEE-odd-ih-see]. This is the field of theology that attempts to answer the ancient question, “Why does a beneficent God permit evil persons and evil events to exist within His created order?”**

We mere humans, limited as we are in our knowledge and understanding, have never been able to construct an entirely satisfactory answer to this question. The goodness of God is one of those things we must, quite literally, take on Faith, trusting that when we enter into the presence and fellowship of God we will then be given a fuller and more satisfying explanation than we can derive for ourselves.

Profound mysteries are often best dealt with in poetry rather than in bald prose and one of the earliest, and to this point one of the best, attempts at an answer to this conundrum is given to us in that form. No one has ever surpassed the Book of Job as an expression of man’s puzzlement at the existence of evil and at the lack of any apparent connection between the hardships people endure here on earth and any misdeeds by which they might have merited such treatment.

In this regard, we have only to recall Our Lord’s comments about the victims of a Roman massacre in Galilee

or of the collapse of a building in Jerusalem: “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No.... Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam [**SILL-owe-amm**] fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No....”⁹

2. **When we are confronted with an undeserved evil such as the slaughter of the Innocents, we have no adequate response except to trust in God’s mercy, to pray for the repose of the souls of those who were slain, and to pray for the repentance and conversion of the evil-doers.**

Job’s three unwise counselors were like those whom Jesus rebuked; they told Job that the innocent and upright do not suffer¹⁰ so God must be punishing Job for something he had done.¹¹ Only Job’s fourth friend, Elihu [**EE-lye-who**] the Buzite [**BUZZ-ight**] reminded him that God is so far beyond human comprehension that human wisdom is inadequate to understand Him; man’s only adequate response to God is to fear Him and trust in Him.¹²

Conclusion:

As we contemplate the evil event that gave rise to the Church’s observance of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, whatever the precise nature of that event may have been, we are almost inescapably reminded of other, similar evils that have occurred or are still occurring in our own time. We are all too familiar with terrorists’ kidnappings and murders of school children in the Netherlands and Russia, ethnic cleansing targeted at women and children in Bosnia and Kosovo, and of course the pandemic of abortion that disfigures our own society.