

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE HOLY INNOCENTS (DECEMBER 28)**

The Rev'd Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priest¹

The Lessons: ²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.³

“At the same time, saith [SETH] the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus saith [SETH] 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 loving-kindness 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 [EE-frih-imm] shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the LORD our God. ...

“... ”

“Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah [RAY-muh], lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel [RAY-hell] weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith [SETH] 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.⁴

“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.

Homily:

Today commemorates the children killed by King Herod in his search to eliminate the Christ Child. The little boys whom Herod ordered to be killed were not killed because of anything they

¹ Priest Associate, St. David's Anglican Catholic Church, Charlottesville, Virginia.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Jeremiah 31:1-6, 15-16 (KJV).

⁴ St. Matthew 18:1-14 (KJV).

crippled. Some were blind. Some were old. All were poor. And the deacon said, “Here, sire, is the treasure of the church.”

People say that those who appose abortion on demand are motivated by religion. They are right. Our religion values the life of even the smallest and most vulnerable among us. We condemn Herod for his barbaric act in slaughtering those innocent children just to protect his own position in the world. How then can we look with approval on what our own government allows and even finances with our tax money? The religion of the Bible considers the taking of innocent life to be an insult to Him whom we call “the lord and giver of life.” God cannot be pleased with what He sees taking place every day in the abortion mills of the world.

There is a service in the Prayer Book for the burial of a child. More than once I have had the terrible duty of reading that Office, but I have never been able to do so without breaking down at some point, usually when I get to these words of Jesus’: “Take heed that you despise not one of these little ones; for I say to you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.”

The office also contains a prayer with which I will close. I offer it for all the holy innocents of the world:

“O God, whose most dear Son did take little children into his arms and bless them; Give us grace, we beseech thee, to entrust the souls of these children to thy never-failing care and love, and bring us all to thy heavenly kingdom; through the same thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*”

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had done but only because of what someone thought they might do. For that reason they are called are called The Holy Innocents.

These children paid with their lives for being associated with Jesus. For that reason, the Church honors them as martyrs.

I do not believe that Herod really wanted to kill all those children. He really only wanted to kill the One Who might cause a problem for him in the future. But since he did not know which One it was, he killed them all. In those days life was cheap compared to power. It still is.

Herod was a piker compared to the thousands of mothers every year in this country who kill their babies in the womb, not because of anything the little ones have done but because of the trouble they might cause in the future. If these children are allowed to be born, they might interfere with the mother’s career, or her financial plans, or her freedom to control her own schedule.

Just before Christmas I heard a television commercial by Planned Parenthood, suggesting that a gift certificate for an abortion might make a good Christmas present. How ironic. How fortunate that Mary did not receive such a gift.

In the Bible the idea of child sacrifice appears very early. The practice was common in the ancient world. The Biblical vision of Hell is based on the fiery pit into which children were cast as a sacrifice to the pagan god Molech. So when God tells Abraham to kill his son, Abraham does not consider it an unusual demand. But God stayed the hand of Abraham and instead accepted the sacrifice of a sheep, which God Himself provided.

The Bible does teach that the firstborn son of any family belongs to God by right. But the story of Abraham and Isaac makes clear that the firstborn son is to be redeemed, bought back as it were, by a substitute sacrifice.

In one of the plagues of Egypt, God sent the angel of death to claim the firstborn son of every family. The Jews were instructed to redeem their sons by killing a lamb and smearing the doors of their houses with the blood of the lamb to indicate that the substitute sacrifice had been made. The angel of death passed over those houses. It was the sons of the Egyptians who had not been redeemed that the angel of death took.

The Bible does not mention it, but I am confident that if any of the Jews had failed to make the sacrifice and smear the blood on their doors, the angel of death would have claimed their firstborn sons as well.

In later days when the first son was born to a Jewish family, the child would be taken to the temple and presented before the Lord. At that time the parents would redeem their son by offering an animal sacrifice in his place. The prescribed offering was a lamb and a dove, but for a poor family two doves or pigeons was acceptable. So the Bible tells us that Mary and Joseph took young Jesus to the temple, presented him to God, and then bought Him back by the sacrifice of two young pigeons.

This whole idea of a substitute sacrifice to redeem the life of a child is the root of the substitutionary theory of atonement, whereby Jesus, the Lamb of God, is sacrificed on the cross to redeem the whole human race upon which the angel of death has a claim.

But the actual sacrifice of a child, even to God, is condemned throughout the Bible. How much more condemned is the sacrifice of the Holy Innocents to the fears and the political considerations of Herod. How much more to be condemned is the sacrifice of a child to his own mother's hedonistic desires.

I know there are times when the life of a child in the womb might have to be sacrificed to save the life of the mother. Fortunately such instances are rare. There have been times when mothers in that situation have elected to sacrifice their own lives in or-

der that their child might live. Those are difficult decisions that a mother must make, and only God can decide which decision was the right one in such horrendous circumstances. But this I can tell you: The God of the Bible is understanding and forgiving, but He is never pleased by the shedding of innocent blood. When He confronted Cain about Abel's murder, God said, "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

Modern science has made it possible to determine before a child is born whether that child is a boy or a girl. In Asia, many children are killed in the womb simply because they are girls. Abortion for sex selection is frowned on but legal in this country.

It is also possible to detect in the womb certain defects that will make it difficult for the child to live a normal life. Some might think it an act of kindness to abort such a child rather than bring him into a world where he would not only be a burden on his parents but would have a difficult time throughout his life. Sarah Palin, for instance, was severely criticized for giving birth to a child with Down's Syndrome when it was known in advance that the child would have that problem.

But consider this. When people begin to take it on themselves to decide who is worthy to live and who should die, it will not be long before they begin to decide to euthanize old people who are in pain or who are considered a burden and are no longer productive.

There is a story about a deacon who was in charge of the church's treasury. Deacons often had such responsibilities in former times. The church was believed to be rich, and one day the king decided that he needed more money. It seems that governments are always deciding that. So the king called the deacon and threatened to kill him the next day unless he produced the treasure of the church.

The next day came, and when the king awoke and went out on his balcony he saw before him a crowd of people. Some were