



Holy Innocents
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Christmas 1
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In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen.

Today we celebrate what is known as the Feast of Holy Innocents, which is a rather sanitary name for the remembrance of Herod's decision to kill all children under the age of two. The story tells us that Herod authorised this horrific event in order to eliminate a child he believed might grow up to overthrow him. It may seem strange that three days after Christmas we commemorate one of the horror stories of the New Testament, but for better or worse, this story is part of the Christmas tradition just as much as stables, stars, shepherds, and fruitcake.

Today I'm going to suggest two different approaches to the Gospel reading we just heard. The first is a more academic approach. Biblical scholars examining the Gospel of Matthew have reached some consensus about this story. Most agree that while Matthew is the first gospel in the New Testament, it was probably the second gospel written, about 50 years after Jesus died, and was written for a Jewish audience.

How do we know this? The writer of Matthew constantly uses phrases like "Jesus said these things to fulfil the words of the prophet whoever..." These phrases only occur in Matthew. Why? Because the Jewish people of the first century had been waiting for the Messiah for hundreds of years. The writer of Matthew is trying to make a persuasive argument that says, "See, this was the guy you've been waiting for! This Jesus is your Messiah."

But there's another way Matthew appealed to a Jewish audience. To the Jewish mind, Moses was the greatest of all the prophets. Everything a prophet should be, Moses was. The writers of Matthew knew this and intentionally wrote parts of the Jesus story in ways that would remind readers of Moses.

Think about it. If I told you about a man who went up a mountain to receive God's law, who would you think of? Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. But in Matthew's gospel, it is Jesus who teaches his disciples about God's law while standing on a mountain. We call this the Sermon on the Mount—a new story that deliberately echoes the story of Moses.

In the same way, Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus wanders alone in the wilderness for 40 days. And this brings me back to today's Gospel reading. What happened at the time of Moses' birth? Pharaoh, frightened that the Israelites would become more powerful than his own people, decreed that all newborn Jewish boys should be thrown into the Nile. Moses' mother hid him in the bulrushes, where he was found and raised in Pharaoh's household.

The similarity is striking. In today's story, Jesus' life is threatened at birth, just as Moses' had been. Mary and Joseph flee into Egypt until Herod dies. Thus Jesus comes out of Egypt, just as Moses had before him.

If we follow this logic to its conclusion, we become sceptical of whether today's story of infant murder actually happened. In fact, it's reasonable to conclude that there was no mass killing of Jewish children at the time of Jesus' birth, and that this story is an imaginative invention of the writers of the Gospel of Matthew.

But that is not the most helpful conclusion to reach. By looking at the Gospel this way, it becomes easy to distance ourselves from an unpleasant story that raises difficult questions. To conclude that we don't need to concern ourselves with what could well be a work of fiction and we should just get back to trying to finish off the Christmas ham, is to have missed the deeper point of this story. This leads me to the second approach.

Today's Gospel story is a reminder that the world of Jesus' birth—our world—is a world where great injustice occurs and continues to occur. While the birth of Christ heralds the beginning of a new age of peace and justice, the peace we are longing for has not yet come to pass.

That point is made crystal clear to us each and every day. Our world is not a just or happy place. Children still die in wars. Families still flee violence. The vulnerable still suffer at the hands of the powerful.

The Christmas message is not a trite message of "there, there, all is better now." The death of children as part of the Christmas story reminds us that while a new promise has been made to humanity through the gift of Jesus, and while we should rejoice in that gift, the work of healing our world still lies before us. That work is urgent. That work is ours. Amen.