

SPG#225, The Holy Innocents
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Jeremiah 31:15-17

Revelation 21:1-7

Matthew 2:13-18

It really does pay to stay on top of the church year. And especially does it pay at this time of the year. For we have been basking in the warmth and glow of Bethlehem and the manger.

I can remember at different times in my life, wishing that Christmas could last all year long.

Wishing that I could bottle that warmth and glow and take it with me when I was paying bills or reading about violence and death in the world.

And so today, as we are basking in the glow of Christmas we encounter the feast day of The Holy Innocents. And it may have the effect of jarring us painfully away from the idyllic. And the gospel for today is anything but idyllic. For it is about King Herod, who after the birth set about with murderous intention to find the Baby. Because he perceived him as a threat to his own political power.

And so, while Mary, Joseph, and baby fled south into Egypt, Herod went on a murderous rampage in Israel, seeking to eliminate this baby who would be King. The victims of his rampage became known as the Holy Innocents. In the early days and weeks of Jesus' life the Holy Family were fugitives. They were pursued by a paranoid despot.

Joseph, who in a dream had been reassured that he could take Mary for his wife, now heard in a dream that he must take Mary and the baby and run for their lives. And so Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, who had been so caught up in the wonder and the miracle of God becoming human, were now called upon to protect that miracle, and to ensure that Jesus' life would be for all people. Mary and Joseph found themselves in a valley between two mountainous spiritual realities.

On the one side was the very fact of the birth of Jesus, of God becoming human, of the incarnation. On the other was the reality that this baby was vulnerable as any baby and needed protection. It was fantastic enough that Mary and Joseph had been called to be parents of Jesus in the first place. And the fact of his birth would have been enough to boggle the minds of any mother and father. But now, on the heels of wonder, amazement, and love of their child they learned of danger. They knew they had to run. They were called upon to protect the incarnation. This was one of the first times, but by no means would it be the last that people around Jesus found themselves companions to mountainous spiritual realities.

Joseph knew that they would remain in Egypt until it was safe, until Herod was dead. And again he is told in a dream, "Herod is dead. Return to Israel." Depending on theologians and writers in the early church, this easily could have been a major feast day, the Death of Herod. As part of Christmas we could easily be celebrating the season of Advent before Herod's death.

But as it was, in the verses after today's gospel, this event merited a statement in one of Joseph's dreams. "Herod is dead. Return to Israel."

This story, which is somewhat minimized and submerged in the scripture, brings to mind several spiritual considerations. Let us consider a few.

In the reading of scripture, this is the first time that Jesus Christ is presented as a delicate, vulnerable, spiritual reality. We know very little of Jesus' childhood, still less of his adolescence. We know of the beginning, duration, and end of his mission in the flesh. We know of his teachings, his friendships, his healings, his miracles.

And we know something of his vulnerability in and around the crucifixion. But we are not accustomed to considering his vulnerability as a baby, and what that can mean for us.

It definitely meant something to Mary and Joseph. And their spiritual lives were deeply and profoundly impacted as they fled. But it may be tempting to see Mary and Joseph as rarefied people, prone to visions and dreams, prone to being visited by angels. And so, what could we possibly have in common with these people of advanced theological/spiritual status?

They were special people, chosen by God to assist in the bringing about of the incarnation, the birth of Jesus. But, on the other hand, they were just parents. Like many of us who are, who have been, or who will be. And they were afraid for their child's life. And I am sure they were afraid for theirs. What they knew as they waited for the birth, as they participated in the birth, and as they cared for the child after the birth was what any parent, particularly the mother, knows about babies. They must be cared for, fed, protected, nourished, held, and tended to all hours of the day and night. This little miracle of God, this little Word Become Flesh required parenting as any baby would require parenting. The point is this. At various times in our lives the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ is a vulnerable, delicate, spiritual reality. His is a presence that must be cared for and nourished. If his presence is not cared for, it is easy to not believe in him.

There are many learned people in our world who reject the reality of Jesus Christ as Son of God in a one dimensional kind of way. A.N. Wilson, a writer, a man who has an advanced theological degree, has decided that Jesus is not the Son of God. For him the facts do not add up for him to be a believer. Has he ever nourished the quiet and delicate reality of the Word Become Flesh? I am doubtful.

And so it is that believing and living the life of a follower is not just subscribing to a philosophy that you have decided has merit.

Believing is work. It is caring for the still, small presence in your heart, a presence that needs to be cared for and nourished by your attention, by your devotion. And so, the question becomes, how good are we at spiritual parenting?

Now, granted, we are used to thinking of our faith in more adult terms. And the councils of the Church have provided us with good adult language to use in our worship. The Council of Nicea in 325 AD gave us the Nicene Creed, which we say every Sunday. "I believe in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord....."

And those are very adult words. And we need them. Because part of our faith is theologizing, and thinking, and concluding, and deciding because we accept and because we are convinced.

But it is not all there is to faith. Part of our faith is a still, small voice. Part of our faith is a quiet, loving presence which calls for our attention, calls for our caring.

I think Mary and Joseph knew about faith on that level when they cared for the baby Jesus. I think they knew about a still small presence in each of their hearts.

Do you remember all the times in the New Testament when Jesus took children in his arms?

Do you think those children thought in terms of adult theology when they had been held by Jesus? The old man, Simeon, knew something when he saw the baby Jesus for the first time. He knew something about the baby. He knew something about himself. He said, "I can die now. For I have seen the Savior."

The kind of faith we are talking about does not feel compelled to question and conclude. That kind of faith does not decide based on the evidence. That kind of faith enjoys as a child would enjoy. That kind of faith is wide eyed, trusting, vulnerable, and innocent. That kind of faith needs to be recognized and cared for.

The figure of Herod in today's gospel represents the worst parts of the world and the worst parts of people.

The worst parts of the world and the worst parts of us do not treasure the still, small voice. The worst parts of the world and the worst parts of us are abusive to children. And as adults we must deal with those agonizing and furious realities.

Typically the story of Mary, Joseph, and the Baby on Holy Innocents Day puts us to mind of all the innocent children of the world. It puts us to mind of all the children who suffer because of starvation, neglect, and violence. It puts us to mind of the ministry that is before us to care for and protect and nourish the vulnerable.

May the story of the Holy Innocents make us mindful of all the needy children of the world. May the story of the Holy Innocents make us mindful of our own childlike faith. May it make us mindful of the delicate, vulnerable side of being a Christian. Amen.