

**Sunday 28 December 2025, Holy Innocents' Day**  
**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

*A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation, and bitter weeping;  
Rachel weeping for her children  
refusing to be comforted for her children,  
because they are no more.*

The slaughter of the innocents is a curious moment to commemorate in the days immediately after Christmas. It's a truly dark episode in the life of Jesus and it takes place just after the visit of the magi which we will celebrate next week. The complex history of church feasts has put us slightly out of narrative order today, but what happens is this: the wise men come to Herod looking for the King who the stars tell them has been born. Searching the scriptures, Herod's counsellors tell the magi to go to Bethlehem. They do so and find the baby Jesus. But, warned by an angel, they do not go back to Herod.

Herod, from the moment the magi arrived, had been concerned. A new king being born would be a threat to his rule. He told the magi that he wanted to come and worship the baby, but really his heart was full of murderous rage. When the magi did not return, no choice remained but to send his soldiers with orders to kill every single child in Bethlehem under the age of two years.

It's awful, a truly hideous example of violence towards the innocent. Indiscriminate slaughter of an entire village's babies and toddlers; can you imagine it? The initial shock, the realisation of what is happening, the desperation, the screams. What on earth does such a thing have to do with Christmas? Why is it 'celebrated' as a feast of the Church?

*Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings hast Thou ordained strength, because of Thine enemies : that Thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.* In Psalm 8 we find a profound acknowledgment that the voices of children are fit to praise God. In fact, not only fit but perfectly suited. Have you ever been praised by a child? Can you recall the look of perfect, innocent admiration and love on a child's face? It is this voice and this expression towards God that makes a nonsense of the enemy and the avenger, those who would seek to bring honour to themselves instead of giving the glory to the one who made them. The voices of the helpless calling out to the Lord are no less voices of praise. As those innocents were being killed, their cries were perfectly pure in a way that ours are often not. They were not self-interested or self-seeking; their only desire was to be saved by someone stronger than they.

The attitude of a child in need is the attitude we should more often have towards God. Holy Innocents' Day is an opportunity to acknowledge our helplessness, to return to our childlike innocence and trust in God. It is a reminder that when we come to him trying to justify ourselves we do him a disservice. The only right attitude before a holy God is one of simple pleading for mercy and love.

*At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.* In Matthew's gospel, Jesus makes much of children and of childlike faith. The mystery of faith is revealed to children even while it is hidden from those who think themselves wise and reasonable. The innocence of those little boys and girls murdered at Herod's command brought to their suffering a quality of faith that we who are grown can only dream of. Their only thought was to long for a saviour.

Whenever and wherever the innocent suffer, it shows up all the more starkly the folly of the schemes and squabbles of those who the world imagines to be wise. There is no wisdom in a course of action that will lead the innocent to suffer; there is no reasonableness in the kind of destruction that shatters a child's life. We are called by Holy Innocents' Day to check our motives and weigh the potential results of our intended actions, that we harm not one of these little ones.

These are very useful lessons, you may be thinking. But what about the children? Why didn't God save them? I'm loathe to try and pry into the mystery of God's providence and it's so easy to want to explain away difficulties in order to get God off the hook. But he doesn't need my help and he certainly doesn't need me to defend his secret will. Yet, I feel compelled to respond to my own question why. I find one answer satisfactory: in his divine providence God permitted the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem so that we would have an example of what salvation looks like.

If this seems strange, let me place Jeremiah 31.15, Rachel weeping for her children, alongside Jeremiah 31.16:

*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.*

The massacre of the innocents is only half the story. The other half is a promise. It is a promise of the redemption of violence, of restoration after suffering, of new life after death. The children Herod murdered may have died in this life, but they were immediately taken up into heaven, into the arms of God. Their lives on this earth were short, their end brutal, but they are at peace without having to have endured the loss of innocence associated with coming to adulthood. They were, and remain, innocent. We who have lost our innocence in so many ways know what a blessing such a preservation would be.

'And they shall come again' is a reference which may be interpreted as pointing to the resurrection. In this life we lose our innocence and are, metaphorically- but truly painfully, slaughtered by the wickedness of this world. Yet the prophecy promises a return to that former

state of innocence, new life after death. Stop crying, says Jeremiah, it hurts now but soon the pain will be gone.

Salvation from the pain of this world is something the Holy Innocents experienced for themselves. Herod thought he was destroying the promised king. Instead he brought about an immediate earthly fulfilment of the salvation the child Jesus came to bring. Because of the voice of the prophet Jeremiah, we are able to see Herod's wickedness as a fulfilment of the promise of the Saviour. And in celebrating this feast, we are drawn towards the childlike faith of the Innocents with whom we are, by faith, made one.

*I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes... [from whose mouths] hast Thou ordained strength. Amen.*