

Sermon for Sunday 28 December 2025 at Holy Trinity Geneva

*Texts: Jeremiah 31. 15-17; 1 Corinthians 1/26-39; Matthew 2.13-18*

## **The Holy Innocents**

It seems astonishing in many ways that in the four days which follow our celebrations of Jesus' birth on Christmas Day, the church commemorates in its annual liturgy, two martyrdoms and a massacre. These are the martyrdom of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr on Boxing Day, the martyrdom of St Thomas à Becket on 29 December and the massacre of the young children commanded by King Herod which we observe today.

And yet perhaps we should not be surprised. For it reminds us that the incarnation of Jesus, of God's son coming into our world, represented a threat to those who held power and influence. A threat because the coming of the Prince of Peace whose kingdom is rooted on justice, mercy, righteousness and love, challenged kingdoms and systems of political and religious authority rooted on force and fear.

We see this confrontation coming right from the outset. In the great Prologue to his gospel, St John tells of the incarnation of the Word, God's Son who takes flesh and comes to dwell with us. But in the very same Prologue, St John also warns that the world came into being through him, the world did not know him, and although he came to his own people, they did not accept him".

This was certainly the case for King Herod, the tyrant who ruled in Judea. He was less than delighted when the wise men from the East came to his palace, seeking the child who had been born king of the Jews so that they could worship him. He summoned the chief priests and scribes of the people, the 'think tank' of his time so that they could tell him where the Messiah was to be born. He is frightened and they were frightened too. For a new king could only represent a threat to their power and authority too, as they were propping up Herod's puppet kingdom within the powerful Roman empire. If Rome heard of this and intervened, Herod could well be out of a kingdom and they from their roles of control. They brief Herod of the prophecy that the child will be born in Bethlehem.

Herod summons the wise men again, and disguising his fear and anger well, guides them to seek the children in Bethlehem. He tells them to come back and advise him immediately they find the child so he may worship him too. Then he sits and waits, no doubt with mounting anxiety. But, as we know, Joseph is warned in a dream of the threat. The wise men return to their country another way, Mary and Joseph flee as refugees with the newborn Jesus to Egypt and Herod realises with terrible anger that he has been duped.

This is the context for the terrible order which Herod then issues to his army to kill all the children in Bethlehem who were two years or under. It was a calculated, cynical and horrific command from a tyrant who was determined to stick to power, regardless of the cost in human suffering. It was also a reflection of the paranoia the king demonstrated and was to show with increasing intensity against those he feared

could represent any threat to his power and authority. It would lead him eventually to order the murder of his own wife and children whom he suspected of plotting against him.

The murder of those children, that ferocious act of indiscriminate killing of those who were most vulnerable in the local community, has become seared in Christian consciousness. It was kept as a separate festival by the Church from the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the children were recognised as the earliest martyrs.

It has also captured the horrified imagination of artists over the centuries who have portrayed the massacre both in its contemporary setting but also within their own communities and contexts. Thus, for example, Peter Bruegel depicts the massacre of the innocents as taking place in a winter, snow-covered scene in the Southern Netherlands, just before the Dutch Revolt against the occupying Spanish forces. It's a reminder that this terrible act was not restricted of the time of Jesus, or even the early church, but rather occurs time after time in human history where those who wield power often tyrannically, feel challenged by those who stand up for human freedom, dignity and justice.

We react with horror to the massacre of the innocents, happening so quickly after the birth of Jesus, within city of his birth and the surrounding villages. Each of us here I imagine has held or been alongside a baby or young toddler at some point in our lives and is aware of their utter vulnerability and trust in their parents to care for them and protect them. And each of us, I think can imagine the horror of having your child dragged away and murdered before your eyes.

What I think we are less good at recognising and responding is this violence and cruelty which continues to be perpetuated against children in our own times. Much of this violence is arising from war and the effects of war on children. Unicef reports that the impact of armed conflict on children had reached devastating and likely record levels in 2024. 473 million children (this is one in 6 children worldwide) now live in areas affected by conflict. This figure has risen from 10% of the world's children in the 1990s to nearly 19% today.

The effects on living in a conflict zone on children are multiple and all damaging. Some are killed or badly injured including from land mines. Many are displaced with their families from their homes and become either internal or external refugees, vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. A number of children lose out on the education, years of learning which they will never access again. As well as physical illness and injury, they also face a much higher likelihood of suffering mental illness due to the trauma which they have endured.

But violence against children today is not just happening in war and conflict zones. Unicef figures of global violence against children show that every 4 minutes, somewhere in the world a child is killed by an act of violence. About 90 million children worldwide have suffered sexual violence and a higher percentage of these are girls. 1.6 billion children, this in 2 out of 3 children worldwide, are subject of physical punishments and psychological aggression

In the face of such suffering, it's not surprising that we can feel quite helpless and wonder what, if anything we can do. However I think our scripture readings today guide us to discern that as followers of Christ, there are steps we can take which can make a difference

First of all, we can hold onto the truth that the birth of Christ has meant that the light of God's love has come into our world and cannot be extinguished. That light which Jesus literally incarnated in his earthly life, show us that at we too were created by God, that we are precious in His sight and that there is another path instead of the violence and cruelty of the world; a way rooted on love, hallowing each other as God's children and seeking the well-being not the harm of others in the way we lead our lives.

Rooted in this hope, we can pray for the world's children, for their protection that they may receive justice, compassion and all that they need for their flourishing and well-being.

We can also act in two ways. Here in Geneva, and particularly here at Holy Trinity, we have her inspiring example of Eglantyne Jebb. She and her sister, Dorothy Buxton, were horrified at the hardline and cynical approach of the British government and other allies after World War one, using blockades which condemned many particularly children in Austria and Germany to starvation. Risking huge unpopularity, they campaigned against this, were branded as 'unpatriotic and were arrested. They went on to found the '*Save the Children*' charity. Eglantine then came to Geneva and campaigned, for the rights of children. This led in 1924 to the Declaration for the Rights of the Child, which enshrined in international law, commitment to recognising and protecting children's rights worldwide.

We too can be alert and responsive to all we can do in our own time, both to support those international organisations, which are working to support and protect the rights of the child. We can also use our political voice and vote on issues which affect the welfare, justice and protection of children.

Finally, we can explore our own relations with children both within our families, our church community here and other church communities with which we are linked. We can ask ourselves whether we are doing all we can to ensure that children are safe and feel safe and can flourish and where we do all we can to prepare them well for the future, even though it may be at cost to ourselves.

In our Old Testament reading today, God promises Rachel that although she is weeping now for the children taken into exile, to have hope for God will restore them to their own country. Trusting in God's promise for healing and restoration, let's commit ourselves to do all we can to ensure they can flourish in the present and look forward to their future with confidence and hope.

**Amen**

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