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Holy Innocents, Martyrs, December 28, 2011  
A reworking of my sermon for Holy Innocents, December 28, 1997  
Jeremiah 31:15-17, 1 Peter 4:12-19, Matthew 2:13-18

In the Name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thus says the LORD: A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more. (Jeremiah 31:15, RSV)

Here we are, just barely into the Twelve Days of Christmas, and suddenly the liturgical calendar interrupts the joy of the Christmas Season with the sad, sad story of the death of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem. But perhaps we should not regret this interruption, because that is how life is! God willing, we have some stretch of good days, some full measure of joy, but then it is often interrupted by sorrows, some of which we suffer innocently. Just today I read an article in *The Economist* about persecution of Christians across the world<sup>1</sup>. The good news is that the Christian faith is flourishing. But the sad thing is that it is flourishing in parts of the world where it is suffering persecution. The Bible knows about such things. The Bible is not naïve about human life.

So, on this third day of Christmas, the Church's calendar asks us to speak of this great and sad subject -- the matter of innocent suffering. The subject is too great for me, I know. I am just clay, and my few words are far too poor to do justice to the immense reality of innocent suffering. But I pray that the Holy Spirit, who searches the heart of both God and humanity, may fashion some word of comfort and holiness for us.

I mean to speak of three groups: (1) the injurer: King Herod. (2) those who grieve for the injured. And (3) the injured, which might well include us too.

## **ALAS FOR HEROD TOO**

These two-year-old boys of Bethlehem had done no wrong. They did not deserve to be killed. They should have been toddling around, smiling at mother and father, playing with puppies and kittens, having fun. Murderers and terrorists may deserve to be killed, I do not say, but these little ones of Bethlehem did not deserve to die. The King should not have killed them, but rather cherished them. In madness and wickedness, he had them murdered. He tossed them aside, as if their little lives meant nothing. He ordered their massacre, in a spasm of evil, in an attempt to kill the Christ Child. On Judgment Day, these little ones could have

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.economist.com/node/21542195?fsrc=nlw|hig|12-28-2011|editors\\_highlights](http://www.economist.com/node/21542195?fsrc=nlw|hig|12-28-2011|editors_highlights)

been his greatest defense. When Herod could have pleaded nothing else, when Herod would have to confess that he had wasted and ruined the life and dominion given to him by God, at least he could have pointed to the children of his kingdom and said, “

But I did the best I could for them. I may have failed in every other way, but at least I tried to give the children a chance.

Instead, Herod is now vulnerable to the millstone hanged about his neck, plunging him to the depths of the sea. (Luke 17:1-2) Rachel weeps for her children. She weeps for them, because, in the stark words of scripture, they “are no more.” In reality, we should also weep for Herod, who was so lost in sin.

Herod has spoiled his life in a most extreme way. I do not say that he is beyond forgiveness. But judging by the Bible, the man died unrepentant. There is no word of sorrow from Herod. There is sign of regret. He passes on to his Maker and his Final Judge, and there we must leave him.

## **THOSE WHO WEEP**

My opening text is about Rachel weeping for her children. I chose that text because I am mindful that one of the first things to say about innocent suffering is that it is indeed a matter worthy of tears. In the course of this sermon, if I should manage to speak some word of encouragement about those who suffer innocently, I do not intend this to mean that those who suffer should not cry. And I cannot mean that those who grieve should pretend that they have no cause to grieve. No! The innocent children of Bethlehem may be enjoying endless delight at this very moment with Christ Jesus. Their voices may join with those of the angels in singing praises toward the One whom King Herod hated so much as to kill them all. The present and everlasting joy in the hearts of the children of Bethlehem may exceed anything you or I might know. And if you could ask them whether they would prefer to come back to their Bethlehem village, they might in a united chorus of voices, No leave us here! All of that might be true, but when the Biblical text tells the story, the only word of commentary it permits itself is this:

Rachel weeping for her children, *refusing* to be consoled...

That is how cruel and bitter the pain, caused by King Herod on that awful night. Rachel weeps and refuses to be comforted, for the children of Bethlehem are no more -- at least, they are no more on this earth.

## **THE INJURED**

And I have spoken of the injurer - King Herod - and those who grieve for those who suffer innocently. I mean the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, of

Bethlehem. They have good reason to grieve for the children massacred by King Herod. Now, let us speak of those who are injured innocently.

Go to the seashore and count the waves coming to shore. As numberless as are the waves of the ocean, so without number are the people who suffer innocently on this earth.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to reckon the magnitude of human suffering. There are countless troubles both in town and countryside. There are murderers, robbers, pirates, and villains on desert, sea, land, and air. There are hit-and-run drivers, hard-hearted so-called friends, unjust employers, and corrupt ministers of justice. But if we could convert everyone one of them, there would still be countless causes of suffering. If every sinner on the face of the earth were to repent and amend his or her ways, we could still be assaulted, buffeted, and too often broken by sickness, accidents, and calamities of fire, wind, flood, earthquake, and volcano. And if we should escape all of these troubles, there is still this problem of aging. "What have I done to deserve this!" we can imagine many-a-person saying.

I am not as strong as I was. Can't run as fast, can't jump as high, I simply don't move as smoothly as I used to. My bones are creaking and I fear it is getting worse!

## **THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF SORROWS TOO**

To begin some kind of answer to this multitude of vexations, let us understand that the Bible speaks of them too. From the murder of Able by his own brother, to the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the Bible knows about injustice. It speaks of violence, of rape of both men and women, of robbery, treachery, and poverty. Both old and young suffer, as the blind old man Isaac is deceived by his own son Jacob, as the three Hebrew young men and thrown into the fiery furnace, and as today's innocent children of Bethlehem are murdered by King Herod.

The Bible is well-acquainted with afflictions of body and soul, of blindness, leprosy and lameness and of the torments of spirit leading to madness. The Bible knows of pestilence and drought, towers falling and endless wars among small nations. It knows of beheadings, betrayals, and crucifixions. The martyrdom of the Holy Innocents is but one of many sad, sad stories in the Bible. Such are the things which we risk being born in a fallen world.

But for all of this, our Lord Jesus has a saying. He who was well-acquainted with sorrow, who received the fullest measure of human suffering, prepares his followers for troubles with these words:

Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul...  
(Matthew 10:28)

Herod killed the bodies of those children of Bethlehem, but he was not able to kill

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<sup>2</sup> Chrysostom, *A Treatise to Prove that No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself*, Vol. 9, page 271.

their souls. That is, Herod could not touch their destinies. Herod may send his henchmen as he wishes, he will never disturb in even the slightest way the eternal life of these children in the kingdom of God.

It is the same with so many characters of the Bible. Cain may kill Able, but he cannot keep God from regarding the deed and from receiving Able into his own strong arms. And now Cain must go on in this life in misery, as an outlaw. Joseph's own brothers may throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery, but unless Joseph hurts himself through sin, they can never touch his dignity. Potipher's wife may rob Joseph of his good reputation, but Joseph can hold his head up, go on quietly, and receive glory nonetheless. Uriah may have his wife stolen from him by the King, and then sent to his death by that same King, but it is precisely in that suffering that Uriah has a chance to reveal that he is more noble than even Israel's most noble king.

St. Paul may be put in prison, loaded with chains, shipwrecked, dragged here and there, afflicted, betrayed, and martyred, yet he is able to testify nonetheless, "I rejoice in my sufferings," and "when I am weak, then I am strong."

You have seen such things, I suspect. You have seen people who have conducted themselves with true grace in spite of extraordinary suffering. And unless the Lord comes quickly, I fear that each of us will have our opportunity to follow Able, Joseph, Uriah, Paul, and the children of Bethlehem in innocent suffering. Then, God be with us. And may he give us strength and grace to follow the exhortation contained in today's Epistle Lesson, where Peter says,

Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good. (1 Peter 4:19, NRSV)

In Jesus' name. Amen.