

Welcome to

Open Space: Biblical Events (1)

The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents



St Mary's Kidlington

January 21st 2024

Carol:

Unto us is born a Son,
King of Quires supernal:
See on earth His life begun,
Of lords the Lord eternal,
Of lords the Lord eternal.

Christ, from heav'n descending low
Comes on earth a stranger;
Ox and ass their owner know,
Be cradled in the manger,
Be cradled in the manger.

This did Herod sore affray,
And grievously bewilder
So he gave the word to slay,
And slew the little childer,
And slew the little childer.

Of His love and mercy mild
This the Christmas story;
And O that Mary's gentle child
Might lead us up to glory!
Might lead us up to glory!

O and A, and A and O,
Cum cantibus in choro,
Let our merry organ go,
Benedicamus Domino

Welcome and Introduction: Cruelty at Christmas

This year the themes for Open Space focus on Biblical events and today our focus is on the Massacre of the Holy Innocents whose feast day is December 28th, right in the middle of the Christmas celebrations. The event happens when Epiphany is over and the kings have set off home another way. But their arrival has triggered an appalling chain of events. Herod, then as now, thinks nothing of killing the innocent for political ends.

The world is brutal, and powerful leaders seek to hang on to power whatever the cost. This is the sort of world into which Jesus was born. The Christ-child is a refugee in the world he came to save. But God, who gives Himself for us all also calls us all to give an account to Him of how we have lived and loved in that world.

Poem: *Refugee* by Malcolm Guite

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.

Reading: Matthew 2. 13-18

When [the wise men] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."
So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."
When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

An article in '*The National*' Scottish newspaper

A small group of travellers, a bunch of intellectuals it seems, were making a journey of solidarity to be with a stateless family, a foster dad, a new mum and their newborn child who had been displaced from the north to the town where she'd ended up having the baby.

They knew enough about knowledge to know that it was complicated but nonetheless they decided their best bet for directions was in the fleshpots of power. It's an easy mistake. Universities, libraries, archives, cultural centres tend to be concentrated in cities and near the buildings of governors and kings.

When they started asking questions about the wee baby they were looking for, the full weight of suspicion, censorship and propaganda came upon them and they realised that not everything the empire told them could be trusted and their normally careful ethical guidelines had failed them, and exposed vulnerable people to potential threat.

They picked their way across bombed-out streets and buildings. They made their visit. Then went home giving the palace and the king a wide berth. For the king's wrath was aroused. He could brook no stateless family, no baby, no hotel for a minor and their fragile parents, he couldn't bear that they were boat people up there on Lake Galilee.

The more he thought of them the greater his rage. They must be destroyed and to be on the safe side, so must all the babies in the town.

He didn't go to war, he went to massacre. Rachel's children, all the children, they were slaughtered. He went in with bombs from the sky, with dumb bombs from drones, with shells from the sea and with missiles from the streets.

His soldiers went from house to house, they shot pregnant women in the street and mowed them down with tanks, they

threw pregnant women from the fifth storey, they wiped out whole families just to be sure, just to be sure, just to be sure. Nine thousand children dead.

Their bodies in mass graves, their heads and limbs blown to pieces, body after grey body, covered in dust and debris, cold. Tiny.

So very tiny.

Dead.

Killed by Israel's soldiers.

Again.

"A voice is heard in Ramah, a voice of bitter crying and weeping, Rachel is weeping for her children, she cries and will not be comforted."

This verse, from Matthew's Gospel, comes through from the Old and New Testament of the Christian Bible. The text lingers. It lingers over every birth. It lingers as a sign of the ever-present fear of statelessness, of losing the land to a state power in unimaginable brutality.

Rachel is the woman who prefigures Mary, she dies giving birth and is buried by a roadside. Mary gives birth to Jesus in Palestine – a refugee, under rubble, bleeding out, under occupation and illegal forced displacement, spat upon, a target of zealotry and hypocrisy Then stripped, tortured, and executed with no grave.

December 28 is traditionally the day when the church celebrates those killed by King Herod in what is known as The Slaughter of the Innocents.

The Christmas Story is no tinsel town. It is messy, humiliated, hungry, cold. It is a collective birth-death trauma for stateless people, under brutal occupation, with no escape.

It is Gaza.

Alison Phipps is Unesco chair for refugee integration through languages and arts at the University of Glasgow

Litany of the Innocents:

A voice is heard in Ukraine

A father weeping for his scattered family

We pray for all families separated by war

A cry is heard in Gaza

A mother keening for her dying baby

We pray for all who have lost their children

A prayer is heard in Israel

A sister praying for her brother held hostage

We pray for all who are held hostage or imprisoned

A song is heard in Syria

A grandparent lamenting that their grandchild has never known peace

We pray for children growing up with violence all around them

A shout is heard in Burkino Faso

A community standing up for justice humanity and hope

We pray for all who work for a better world and hold on to the hope of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Hymn:

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on your side;

Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;

Leave to your God to order and provide;

In every change he faithful will remain.

Be still, my soul; your best, your heavenly friend

Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul; your God will undertake

To guide the future as he has the past.

Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;

All now mysterious shall be bright at last.

Be still, my soul; the waves and wind still know

His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

Be still, my soul; though dearest friends depart
And all is darkened in the vale of tears;
Then you will better know his love, his heart,
Who comes to soothe your sorrows and your fears.
Be still, my soul; your Jesus can repay
From his own fullness all he takes away.

Be still, my soul; the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul; when change and tears are past,
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

So Where is God's Hope?

Matthew quotes a passage from Jeremiah but his readers may well have known its context which is surrounded by God's hope and promise: Jeremiah 31. 15-17

This is what the LORD says:

"A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

This is what the LORD says:

"Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears,
for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD.

"They will return from the land of the enemy.

So there is hope for your descendants," declares the LORD.

"Your children will return to their own land.

Hymn:

Beauty for brokenness Hope for despair
Lord, in the suffering This is our prayer
Bread for the children Justice, joy, peace
Sunrise to sunset Your kingdom increase!

Shelter for fragile lives; Cures for their ills
Work for the craftsman; Trade for their skills
Land for the dispossessed; Rights for the weak
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak

*God of the poor
Friend of the weak
Give us compassion we pray
Melt our cold hearts
Let tears fall like rain
Come, change our love
From a spark to a flame*

Refuge from cruel wars; Havens from fear
Cities for sanctuary; Freedoms to share
Peace to the killing-fields; Scorched earth to green
Christ for the bitterness; His cross for the pain

Lighten our darkness; Breathe on this flame
Until your justice burns brightly again
Until the nations learn of your ways
Seek your salvation and bring you their praise

God of the poor....

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The Invitation:

He was always the guest.
In the homes of Peter and Jairus,
Martha and Mary, Joanna and Susanna,
he was always the guest.
At the meal tables of the wealthy
where he pled the case of the poor,
he was always the guest.
Upsetting polite company,
befriending isolated people,
welcoming the stranger,
he was always the guest.

But here, at this table, he is the host.
Those who wish to serve him must first be served by him,
those who want to follow him must first be fed by him,
those who would wash his feet
must first let him make them clean.

For this is the table where God intends us to be nourished;
this is the time when Christ can make us new.
So come, you who hunger and thirst for a deeper faith,
for a better life, for a fairer world.
Jesus Christ, who has sat at our tables,
now invites us to be guests at his.

The Eucharistic Prayer:

Since you have called us, since you have kept a place for us,
since your face lights up when we sit at your table,
gracious God, **how can we abandon hope?**

When deep down ... despite the contradictions,
we know, we sense, we believe that life is good;
when one of your words rings truer than ever before,
when in one unexpected moment we are given a glimpse of
your kingdom, gracious God, **how can we abandon hope?**

In this place where prayer has been made for many years,
in this place where so many different people
have found their common bond in your call and purpose,
in this place where the walls are waiting to echo your praise,
gracious God, **how can we abandon hope?**

Therefore with the Church throughout the world,
with the Church on the other side of time,
with those who once praised you here
and have now joined the closer harmony of heaven,
we sing the song of your everlasting praise:

**Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest!**

And now, lest we believe that our praise alone fulfils your purpose, we fall silent and remember him who came because words were not enough.

Setting our wisdom, our will, our words aside,
emptying our hearts, and bringing nothing in our hands,
we yearn for the healing, the holding, the accepting, the
forgiving which Christ alone can offer.

Merciful God, send now, in kindness, your Holy Spirit to settle
on this bread and wine and fill them with the fullness of Jesus.

And let that same Spirit rest on us,
converting us from the patterns of this passing world,
until we conform to the shape of him whose food we now
share. **Amen.**

(Taking and breaking bread)

Among friends, gathered round a table,
Jesus took bread, and broke it, and said,
'This is my body — broken for you'.

(Holding up a cup of wine)

Later he took a cup of wine and said,
'This is the new relationship with God made possible because of
my death. Take it, all of you, to remember me'.

Jesus, firstborn of Mary, vulnerable refugee,

have mercy on us.

Jesus, Saviour of the world,

have mercy on us.

Jesus, Monarch of heaven,

have mercy on us.

He whom the universe could not contain,
is present to us in this bread.

He, who redeemed us and called us by name
now meets us in this cup.

So take this bread and this wine.

In them God comes to us so that we may come to God.

And now, as Jesus teaches us, so we pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in
heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us
our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass
against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us
from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the
glory, for ever and ever. Amen.**

The Sharing of Communion

Post Communion Poem:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

*From "The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations" by Howard
Thurman. © 1985 by Friends United Press*

Hymn

Make me a channel of your peace
Where there is hatred let me bring your love
Where there is injury, your pardon Lord
And where there is doubt true faith in You

Make me a channel of your peace
Where there is despair in life let me bring hope
Where there is darkness only light
And where there's sadness ever joy

Oh, Master grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul

Make me a channel of your peace
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
It is in giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we are born to eternal life

Oh, Master grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul

Make me a channel of your peace
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope
Where there is darkness only light
And where there's sadness ever joy

The Blessing and Peace:

The peace of the Lord be with you always
And also with you

We end by exchanging a sign of peace with one another