



Holy Innocents

Year B

28th December, 2017

READINGS

The First Reading - Jeremiah 31: 15-17

The Psalm - Psalm 124

The Second Reading - 1 Corinthians 1: 26-29

The Gospel Reading - Matthew 2: 13-18

[Click here to view the readings](#)

http://bible.oremus.org/?show_adj=no&passages=Jeremiah%2031:%2015-17%0Acw%20Psalm%20124%0A1%20Corinthians%201:%2026-29%20%0AMatthew%202:%2013-18

COLLECTS OF THE DAY

Collect One

Lord,
we beseech thee, give ear to our prayers,
and by thy gracious visitation
lighten the darkness of our hearts
by our Lord Jesus Christ;
who liveth and reigneth with thee
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

O almighty God,
who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings
hast ordained strength,
and madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths:
Mortify and kill all vices in us,

and so strengthen us by thy grace,
that by the innocence of our lives,
and constancy of our faith even unto death,
we may glorify thy holy Name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Collect Two

God our redeemer,
who prepared the blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
Grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge;
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Heavenly Father,
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod:
By your great might frustrate all evil designs,
and establish your reign of justice, love and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 1

Presider or deacon

As we join the whole creation and celebrate with joy the Word made flesh, let us offer prayers to God who dwells among us to the end of time.

Deacon or other leader

By the wedding of the human and divine natures in Christ Jesus.

Glory and praise to you, O living God.

For *N* our bishop and the presbyters, for the deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

Glory and praise to you, O living God.

For all believers who put their trust in the incarnate Son of God.

Glory and praise to you, O living God.

For the leaders of the nations and all in authority, and for peace and justice.

Glory and praise to you, O living God.

For the conversion of the whole human race to our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Glory and praise to you, O living God.

For travellers, for the sick and the suffering, for the hungry and the oppressed, for those in prison, and for the dying and the dead.

Glory and praise to you, O living God.

For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need.

Glory and praise to you, O living God.

Remembering *N*, and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

Source of grace and truth, accept the prayers we offer on this joyful feast.

May we come to see the true light who shines throughout the world and who is God for all eternity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 2

Gracious God, Precious Saviour, Sustaining Spirit, all time is in your hands. We confess the trivial ways in which we misuse precious moments, days, and years. Help us hear anew your call to holy living and use the time we have been given to be productive builders of your Kingdom here...

Lord hear our prayer...

Loving God, maker of heaven and earth and all that is in them, we give you thanks for the newness of life each day, each year; and for your holy presence with us in all times of work and play, joy and difficulty. Help us in this hour, at the doorway to a new era, to be good stewards of time; to be always engaged in doing your will; and to be ever watchful for the new thing you are doing; so that we might be partners in your mission of reconciling the world through Jesus your Son, he who lights our way and who has proclaimed this the year of your favour... Lord hear our prayer...

Father - as we recall this day your purpose to have all people live an abundant and wholesome life, your desire that the blind might see, the lame walk, the poor have good news proclaimed to them, and the prisoners set free, we remember before you those in special need this day. We hold up before you O God..... Lord hear our prayer....

We recall too O God, those who are especially upon our hearts this morning, those named before you - and those whom we name silently before you now.... Lord hear our prayer...

Bless O God all people of this world - and most particularly smile upon your Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church - that world wide congregation called into being by your Son, Christ Jesus, the one who first taught us to pray to you as one family, saying... Our Father

POST COMMUNION

Heavenly Father,
you have given us a pledge of eternal redemption.
Grant that we may always eagerly celebrate
the saving mystery of the incarnation of your Son.
We ask this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near,
your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Eternal God,
comfort of the afflicted and healer of the broken,
you have fed us this day at the table of life and hope.
Teach us the ways of gentleness and peace,
that all the world may acknowledge
the kingdom of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

PRAYERS

O Holy One,
heavenly angels spoke to earthly shepherds
and eternity entered time in the child of Bethlehem.
Through the telling of the Christmas story,
let our temporal lives be caught up in the eternal
in that same child,
that we might join shepherds and all the heavenly host
in praising the coming of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. **Amen.**

God of glory,
your splendour shines from a manger in Bethlehem,
where the Light of the world is humbly born
into the darkness of human night.
Open our eyes to Christ's presence in the shadows of our world,
so that we, like him, may become beacons of your justice,

and defenders of all for whom there is no room. **Amen.**

Light of life, you came in flesh,
born into human pain and joy,
and gave us power to be your children.
Grant us faith, O Christ, to see your presence among us,
so that all of creation may sing new songs of gladness
and walk in the way of peace. **Amen.**

We bless you, Abba, Father,
for you have visited your people
in one like us in all things but sin,
and in human fragility you have revealed
the face of divinity.
Gather into your arms
all the peoples of the world,
so that in your embrace
we may find blessing, peace,
and the fullness of our inheritance
as your daughters and sons. **Amen.**

With the angels of heaven we proclaim your glory, O God.
As the radiance of your presence lights up the heavens,
we pray for enlightenment
for your church on behalf of the whole world.
Grant that, through our prayers,
our lives may radiate the presence of Christ
to all who dwell on earth,
for he is our Lord for ever and ever. **Amen.**

God of all ages,
in the birth of Christ
your boundless love for your people
shattered the power of darkness.
Be born in us with that same love and light,
that our song may blend with all the choirs of heaven and earth
to the glory of your holy name. **Amen.**

O God, whom the Holy Innocents confessed and proclaimed on this day, not
by speaking but by dying, grant, we pray, that the faith in your which we
confess with our lips may also speak through our manner of life. Pour forth,
we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the

Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PEACE

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his name shall be called the Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

PREFACE

You have given Jesus Christ your only Son to be born of the Virgin Mary, and through him you have given us power to become the children of God:

BLESSING

Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one all things earthly and heavenly, Fill you with his joy and peace:

SERMON

I have always found the post-Christmas calendar of the Church to be startling. After the glory and joy of Christmas Day, we are immediately confronted by a run of three festivals: the feast of Stephen, St John's Day, and today, the 28th of December, the Holy Innocents. We call this threesome, 'the Christmas saints', or to give them their medieval title, *Comites Christi*, 'the companions of Christ'.

Stephen the deacon is the first Christian martyr, stoned to death, according to St Luke's account in Acts of the Apostles, because he, as a Greek-speaking Jew, could see that Christianity could never stay within the confines of a Judaism centred on Jerusalem and its Temple cult, but must spread to embrace the world. Stephen's death profoundly influenced the murderously persecuting Saul, pre-empting Saul's conversion to become Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. The feast of Stephen has been celebrated on December 26th since the fourth century in the East and from the early 5th century in the west.

John the Apostle, commemorated on December 27th, might be thought of as a respite, because tradition tells us that he lived on to an old age in Ephesus, and was not a martyr. However, the original feast, established in the East in the 4th century, commemorated both John and his brother James, the sons of Zebedee, the 'Sons of Thunder'. James was the first apostolic martyr, executed by King Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, in AD 44.

And today, we complete the trilogy, with the Holy Innocents, the slaughter of the boys of Bethlehem under Herod the Great; this is a western feast, dating from the beginning of the sixth century.

And so the popular Christmas card image with idealised crib, cosy Jesus lying in fresh straw, surrounded by cherubs, fluffy sheep, and sleepy-eyed donkeys, is rather decimated by what comes next: Stephen, John, the Innocents - persecution, martyrdom, slaughter are the *comites Christi*. And behind them stands the cross itself - the place where the story of Love Incarnate leads - the ultimate attempt to destroy perfect Love, to destroy God in our midst. But today, we see an attempt to destroy him from the outset.

The feast of Holy Innocents is difficult to contemplate because it is about murder, even the murder of infants and young children. I take Matthew's account at face value. I know that many scholars regard the larger narrative, the coming of the Magi from the East, as a kind of sermon in words rather than historically-based narrative. But mass murder was certainly in character with what we know of Herod the Great, who, even if he was in some senses a genius as the present edition of *National Geographic* sets out, was also a wicked, uncompromising and corrupt man according to the Jewish historian Josephus; and there would be a serious moral problem if Matthew had invented this story.

Near Bethlehem, there stand the excavated ruins of the Herodium, one of Herod's citadels and palaces. Standing in those ruins, it was easy to gain a sense of the twisted paranoia caused by rumours of the birth of a rival king just across the road. Herod, who tolerated no rivals, who even had his wife and three of his sons murdered because he thought they were plotting against him, deals with this upstart challenge at source. All the males boys of two and under in the region of Bethlehem must be exterminated; it was as cruel and ruthless as that. Of course, Matthew weaves a bigger picture. Jesus, unlike Herod, is the true King, the true Israelite, the new and greater Moses. He recapitulates the history of God's people: persecuted, his parents carry him down to Egypt as Joseph went down to Egypt; he escapes death as a baby as Moses escaped death as a baby; he came up out of Egypt as Moses led God's people out of Egypt at the Passover. But, the Old Testament was simply a pointer: for now Immanuel, God with us, opens up the way of full and eternal salvation.

And as Matthew was keen to show the coming of Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures, so he sees the murder of the innocents as the fulfilment of Jeremiah 31:

A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping,

Rachel weeping for her children.

She refuses to be comforted, because they are no more.

Of course, in Matthew's day, as today, there is the traditional site of Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem; although this quotation refers to Ramah, the place where the Israelites gathered to be taken into exile in Babylon. And while Jeremiah 31 suggests that this crying would be transformed into joy, because from deepest despair a new hope of a return from exile would emerge, Matthew is more subtle, he leaves us with the tears. However, the wider context is clear - 'Out of Egypt (for Babylon too, is depicted as Egypt), I will call my Son'. In Jesus, this promise of hope - culminating in the actual establishment of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 - is visible and will surely be accomplished. But despite all these theological truths, and Matthew's narrative is splendidly constructed, we are still left with these *comites Christi* - the cry, the agony, the gratuitous cruelty which we are asked to remember this day. We can't escape it, because our Gospel finishes abruptly - half way through what we would call a paragraph - we are left with Rachel's tears.

I'm glad that the Church had the imagination to include this grotesque act of murder, of these so young and wasted lives, in its calendar. And I'm pleased for a number of reasons.

Let me start with Rachel's tears. She refuses to be comforted because they are no more. Because they are no more. And yet, they are still in our memory and perpetually in God's. The tragedy would be if they were indeed no more, but the Church now counts them in the community of the redeemed - they are *holy* innocents. Because their lives were taken away for the sake of Christ, his life, given for them on the Cross, redeems what was lost and taken away for his sake. One of the greatest gifts we have as Christians is to bring into God's memory what we hold in our own, not least all those for whom we grieve, whether those known and loved by us, or those to whom our hearts go out, in the catalogue of human tragedy that we behold as sensitive human beings. This prayer rises like incense as a memorial before God - they are only no more if we fail to remember them. This was why I was moved to watch the scene from Lockerbie this past week - twenty years on and more innocents made holy by focussed and sustained prayer.

Then the title, *Holy Innocents*: their death is taken up into the Sacrifice of Christ for the whole human race. The Church values and honours those who suffer innocently, or at least it should. The worst chapters in the history of

Christianity are when the Church itself, whether corporately or by those who represent it, have oppressed and abused, betrayed trust and sinned grievously. It reminds all of us who exercise positions of power to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of that power, lest we too fall into corruption. Remember the words of Jesus, related to children, but I think applicable to all the poor in spirit to whom Matthew gives the title 'little ones' because they have no earthly power or status, that if anyone puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones, it would be better if a great millstone were hung around his neck and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea. Rather, it is the task of the Church to delight in innocence and to expose cruelty, corruption and vice.

And lastly, this feast makes me hopeful for all who die innocently, whatever the cause of death, and God knows our world is full of them, the innocent victims of war, terror, natural disaster, disease, cruelty, accident, abuse, oppression. We see a glimmer of hope for all the wasted lives that make up, in William Wordsworth's phrase, 'the still, sad music of humanity'. The Holy Innocents embrace them. For the truth and justice of Jesus stand across the whole earth - that is what Immanuel, God with us, came to show: to show the way of love, the way of peace, the way of care, the way of justice. This feast brings comfort, I believe, to all who go through the unbearable agony of the death of a child or those who suffer because of human cruelty. Because there is the hope that such innocents are redeemable and redeemed. So Rachel's tears still stand, but there is one who not only recapitulates the story of Israel, but the story of the human race, who himself suffered innocently died prematurely, but took on and defeated death itself and so who holds the keys of death and Hades, and gives life.

And it is precisely because all these things, violence, murder, persecution, stolen innocence, are *Comites Christi*, companions of Christ, that his face shines out from the crib, we see the glory of God, a picture for us today of hope and love.

David Kennedy in Durham Cathedral

ONLINE SERMON SOURCES

Sermons for the Feast of the Holy Innocents

from the Anglican church in Windsor, Nova Scotia

<http://christchurchwindsor.ca/2011/12/28/sermon-for-the-feast-of-the-holy-innocents/>

<http://christchurchwindsor.ca/2016/12/28/sermon-for-the-feast-of-the-holy-innocents-6/>

Richard Fairchild - Luke 2: 15 - 40

This morning we heard a portion of the "Christmas Story" that we do not hear as often as the rest. Beginning from the worship of the Shepherds and the naming of the child, we heard what happened when, in accordance with the law of God, Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple...

The first thing is that they named Jesus in the manner God had commanded through the Angel Gabriel. They gave him the name "Saviour" for through him God would redeem his people. They believed in what they had been told in their dreams and visions - and obeyed the giver...

That is the second thing Joseph and Mary did - they made Jesus a part of the family of God. They said to God - look he is a child of promise - this baby is meant with all who call on your name - to inherit your kingdom. He is your servant - he is one of us - the ones you gave yourself to after the time of Noah - the ones you said to Abraham and to Moses would be a nation of priests and kings to serve you and bring everlasting glory to your name amongst all the nations...

The third thing that Mary and Joseph did was, when the time of purification was over was present Jesus, as their first born, to God at the temple.

This is a very special thing to do - a thing that is related to all the commands regarding things that are first. Each of them - from the first fruits of our gardens to the first born of our loins and wombs - belong to God. And God asks that we present them to him where he abides. And name them his. Full text at -

<http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-ch01su.php>

The New Normal - Matthew 2: 13 - 23. Day 1

Since Christmas Day has just passed, I have an obligation to remind you of what you already know: "Christmas is not just one day of the year! It is a whole season. There are twelve wonderful days of Christmas!"

It's my job as a preacher to say that; but, now, here's a confession. I don't care how many times I countdown that holiday song...the one with the drummers drumming and the ladies dancing and the swans a-swimming...all the way down to today, "on the second day of Christmas," with its duet of doves...though I know it is still Christmas...in a way...it feels like Christmas already is over.

For good or bad, you may have already sent the shepherds back to the attic, back to their Styrofoam fields to keep watch over their china crèche flock by night. You may be ready to move on because it feels like Christmas should be over.....

http://day1.org/2534-the_new_normal

Herod and Historical probability - Matthew 2: 13 - 23. Sermons from Seattle

There are so many wonderful stories in the Christmas saga. We know the story about the sheep and the shepherds and the angels above them, singing "Glory to God in the highest." We know the story of the shepherds going to the stable and the manger and visiting the baby Jesus who is lying in a manger. We love the story of the wise men with their gold and frankincense and myrrh. These are wonderful Christmas stories.

But so quickly the story turns ugly, and we often forget that in the Christmas season. The Christmas scene on Christmas Eve is such an idyllic moment but it turns so quickly into an ugly moment. Herod the beast, Herod the murderer, became insanely jealous for his own reign, and he decided to murder all the baby boys two years and under. The mothers began to wail in pain.

[http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/
series_a_herod_and_historical_probability.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_herod_and_historical_probability.htm)

Touched by an Angel - Matthew 2: 13 - 23. Sermon help.com

A British newspaper ran a story reported by the staff members of Dorset County Hospital. It concerned a little boy's personal account of his recent tonsillectomy at the hospital. He said, "When I went into the big room it was very bright there were two lady angels dressed in white. Then two men angels looked down my throat and one said, 'God! Look at that child's tonsils.' Then God looked and said, 'I'll take them out at once!'"

The lad obviously mistook a doctor for an angel. And yet, it seemed perfectly natural to him that angels should be in the operating room watching out for him. Are angels just a figment of a child's imagination? Or, is there something to the whole ideal of angels with whom it is possible for human beings to experience a close encounter of the spiritual kind? The popularity of the CBS show, "Touched by an Angel" has brought many to the question, "Is this stuff for real -- could I be touched by an angel?"

<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/ADV-X5-98.html>

CHILDREN

Richard Fairchild - Children's Gifts

<http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-ch01su.php>

New Year Resolutions - Anna's Hosannas

Scroll down to 'Teaching on your own'...

<http://annashosannas.net/New-Years-A.php>

["Christmastide: A Reminder Where Our Hearts Belong,"](#) the Rev. William McCord Thigpen, III, *Day 1*

http://day1.org/1676-christmastide_a_reminder_where_our_hearts_belong

["In the Temple,"](#) the Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad, *Day 1*

http://day1.org/1023-in_the_temple

["Honor Life - in Its Early Years and in Its Decline,"](#) Dianne Bergant, CSA, *America*

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=3358

["Words to Live By; A Light to Guide,"](#) John R Donahue, SJ, *America*

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=2399

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

1st Reading Jeremiah 31: 15–17

460 For all your saints in glory, for all your saints at rest (vv. 1, 2v, 3)

651* Jesus, friend of little children

Psalm Psalm 124

642* Amazing grace (how sweet the sound!)

553* Jesu, lover of my soul

537* O God, our help in ages past

2nd Reading 1 Corinthians 1: 26–29

632* I love to hear the story

168* Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour
600 The wise may bring their learning

The Gospel Matthew 2: 13–18

189* As with gladness men of old
190* Brightest and best of the suns of the morning
194* Earth has many a noble city
172* O come all ye faithful (Adeste, fideles) (omit v. 3 & 7a)
196* O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness
198* The first Nowell the angel did say
184* Unto us is born a Son
201* We three kings of Orient are

- [By the Creator, Joseph was appointed](#)
- [Come now, and praise the humble saint](#)
- [Love came down at Christmas](#)
- [O God of Bethel, by whose hand](#)
- [O Savior of our fallen race](#)
- [O sleep now, holy baby](#)
- [Once in royal David's city](#)
- [Our Father, by whose Name](#)
- [Sing of Mary, pure and lowly](#)
- [When Jesus left his Father's throne](#)

Use Oremus Hymnal site for words

Please commend this resource to colleagues - they simply send an email to churchnewsireland@gmail.com with the message Passwords in the title