

Today's collect reads:

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 innocency of our lives, and constancy of our faith even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is a tough feast day. Why does the Church make a feast day of the slaughter of innocent children? We begin this triduum of feasts with St. Stephen who was a martyr by will and deed, and this is followed by the feast of St. John who was a martyr by will but not by deed, but was not murdered for Jesus' sake, but died of natural causes. Finally today, we remember these infants who were killed by deed, but not with intentionality, not by will. They had no choice in the matter. Herod imposed a death sentence upon them without consideration of if they deserved it or not. Christ the King had entered into the world, threatening the reigns of earthly rulers who thus brutally sought to stamp out any challenge to their thrones.

Is this really something we should be celebrating? It is a tragedy. It is cruel beyond imagination – that children, not old enough to have any agency in the world, would be put to death to somehow secure the position of a king. How then are we justified in celebrating the death of the Holy Innocents?

First, let us state in the most emphatic way, that we do not celebrate the fact of this tragedy. It is a brutally heartbreaking event, and we condemn Herod and anyone else who would hold life so cheaply. What we celebrate this day is that the demonic evil behind Herod's actions was thwarted. Those baby boys did not suffer and die in vain, but rather they suffered, even if not consciously, to save the One who would save them and all mankind. They had an instrumental role in the mission of Jesus Christ. Rather than dying in vain, these children gave their lives for Jesus, the Messiah, and thus we honor them as the first Christian martyrs, even if they did not die with the intentionality of St. Stephen.

Considering that the Church links this event with the prophecy of Jeremiah 31, many would say that God caused this awful tragedy. He knew it would happen, why didn't God stop it? Well, the brief answer is that God gives every person real agency – the power to act in extremely pure and good ways, but also the power to act in extremely wicked ways. Knowing how someone will act is not the same thing as causing it to happen. Allowing evil to occur honors the agency of humanity. Preventing evil always destroys faith. I don't have to have faith in gravity because the law of gravity is never broken. I would not need faith in God if I had a perfect life. Faith is needed, and it is strengthened, when it is tested and challenged by tragedy.

God may sometimes work miraculously to prevent human evil, but once He has made Himself known, then we are the ones that are called to stand up to evil. We are the ones who must go out into the world and tell others about God. We are the ones who through obedience and sacrifice, build the kingdom of God. Bad things will happen to us like it happened to St. Stephen and St. John, like it happened to the babies slaughtered by Pharaoh in the days of Moses and by Herod's attempt to kill the new born Christ. Bad things, torture and martyrdom, happened to Polycarp, Agnes, Fabian, Alban, Boniface, Alphege, The Oxford Martyrs, the Martyrs of Japan, The Martyrs of Uganda, and in our day, the Martyrs of Nigeria among others of our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the faith even now.

It is easy to become discouraged by all the suffering, but this is not the Christian response. Christ was preserved during Herod's purge because there was a larger plan in motion. The suffering of the Holy Innocents was not so that Christ could have a comfortable and easy life. The opposite was the case. Christ was called to endure the greatest suffering to redeem us, to remake humanity and the world through the breaking of His Body and the shedding of His Blood. The sacrifice of those little boys was instrumental to preserve the ultimate sacrifice, the

Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world. When we are tempted to become discouraged, let us remember the 28th verse of the 8th chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." In the face of tragedy, we are called to have faith, and in and with that faith, to persevere in obedience to God.

This does not mean that we do not mourn for our suffering and loss. This does not mean that we should just be blissfully ignorant of tragedy or unfeeling for those who are experiencing loss. No ... let us mourn with them that mourn, and let us comfort others by grieving with them that grieve. The miracle of faith is not about avoiding such sorrow or pain. It is about persisting in faithful living in the face of the grief, the loss, the pain. It is about continuing to trust God when we are confused and hurt, and when we don't have any idea about why any of the bad things are happening. But know that when we endure suffering in patience and faith, it is not meaningless. God will be glorified, and you are and will be glorified. Christ was glorified for His sacrifice, and He is the pattern set for us.

We do not glory in the sacrifice for its own sake. We condemn the killing of the baby boys of Bethlehem. We consider Herod to be a monster, which is verified by history. I am sure he now has his reward. But our salvation, and the salvation of the world, is won partly by the sacrifice of those children. God transform the evil intent and actions of humans into His glory, into our glory. What is then our response? It is first that we should be grateful. We give thanks and praise to God for His eternal purposes which have been worked out in the world through the suffering of so many, of course remembering the suffering of Christ most of all. It is second, that we should determine to remain faithful in all of the suffering that we are called to endure, yes, even if that means suffering on the scale of the early martyrs of the Church, though granted, in our current context this is improbable. May God grant us the measure of faith that we need to conquer the challenges, whatever they may be, that we will encounter, to the glory of God.

Now turning our attention to a contemporary issue, we also remember this day, our modern slaughter of innocents through abortion. The conception of life is a miracle. Our most brilliant scientists and doctors do not understand how consciousness is knit to materiality. How is it that when a husband and wife come together, a new eternal soul, bearing the image of God, is created? We have no real understanding of this. We can only say that God makes it so.

It is sin therefore to kill the image bearer of God. Certainly conception sometimes happens due to violence. Certainly pregnancy and parenthood pose seemingly insurmountable and permanent challenges for individuals, but we must still condemn the ending of human life through abortion, as well as the premature ending of life through euthanasia.

This stance is embodied in the Resolution on Sanctity of Human Life which was first adopted in 1978 by the Reformed Episcopal Church. It reads:

RESOLVED, that we, the Reformed Episcopal Church, vigorously affirm the biblical teaching of the sanctity of human life, and deplore the practice of permitting abortions, with the possible exception of cases where it has been clearly established that the life of the mother is in danger.

Many women, families, have chosen abortion because of the fear and the incredible challenges that raising a child as a single parent without a means of support or of raising a special needs child would present. We cannot condone such decisions, but neither can we condemn those who have made them. All of us have wavered in our faith and failed in our actions under much less pressure. Let us not pretend otherwise. Thus, not only must we forgive such decisions, but we need to do a better job, as the Church, as the people of God, of providing help for women who chose to raise their babies. We must do better at letting the community know that they will be able to find help in the Church for raising their baby.

More than that, we need to actually do what we say we will do. Let us not encourage women under such stress to keep their children without actually providing the help and support they need. We bear the greater guilt if we abandon those who we promised to help.

What can we do to address these needs? First of all, I would encourage those who are looking for a ministry to look up any crisis pregnancy centers in our area and then train and volunteer to help there. These centers are the vanguard in meeting needs of young mothers. Second, our desire to start a school to provide an excellent educational option for young families is also important. The diaper stage is only the beginning of raising children. All parents need support in this way. Beyond this, use your imagination. Third, I am convinced more and more, that we need a facility that can better support families in our worship. Please be praying that God would provide a clear option for us. I don't want us to think primarily about funds. Believe me, God will provide. I want us to be praying for the right place for us. Talk is cheap. It is time to act.

This day we remember and celebrate the Holy Innocents. It is one thing to honor them with words, but let us not stop there. Let us honor them in our actions, through really doing something to help struggling families in the Five Cities area. If you have ideas, I want to hear them. If you see a property that would be good for us, then please say something to me. May we be part of the solution and healing of our community, our corner of God's creation, and not just noisy critics. And may all that we say and do be for the glory of God.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.