

Inquiring into the Massacre of the Innocents

I wonder how many people felt uncomfortable (or even stayed away) on hearing that today's celebration would focus on the Holy Innocents? Even if they include the Wise Men (who properly don't appear until The Epiphany) most tellings of the Christmas story stop short of narrating the Massacre of the Innocents. It's so at odds with the comfort and joy with which we like to envelop ourselves in this season. It's not a part of the story I'm comfortable with (more in a moment) yet I do want to pay attention to it and to them – particularly when the 1st Sunday of Christmas coincides with their day in the Christian calendar, 28th December.

That's the case even though I'm far from convinced that we are dealing with a historic event. There's no attestation of it independent of Matthew; and it isn't compatible with Luke's nativity. But it is part of the scriptural story and therefore our story; and it affirms an essential aspect: that the incarnation happened within the real world of suffering and jeopardy, of sin and evil; rather than within a heavily-redacted, softened version of it. Jesus is spared a premature death at the hands of Herod the Great; but his gospel of love is proclaimed in the face of opposition and he is to share in the innocent suffering which pervades the world.

In many ways, the Massacre of the Innocents rings true: Herod had some of his own children assassinated to preserve his grip on power: it is the sort of thing he would have had no scruples about doing; and he wasn't the last person in authority to want to do away with Jesus. It is the sort of thing that happens in history: in succeeding centuries vulnerable human beings have all too often been considered dispensable by powerful people. This year, Christmas has played out against the backdrop of the release of material relating to those around Jeffrey Epstein. Abuse is not massacre; but it has life-changing and lifelong effects; and it is harm perpetrated by the powerful against the innocent.

With that in the back of my mind, together with an awareness of the various Inquiries into child abuse perpetuated within the Church of England, I wondered whom I would want to question in an Inquiry into the Massacre of the Innocents. I have, perhaps, some surprising candidates. Herod isn't one of them: I don't think there's be too much to gain there, other than insight into the psychology of a puppet dictator. Anyway, Herod died not too long after (actually in 4BC) so let's assume he's not available for questioning.

The first person I'd want to call is Matthew: after all, he wrote the account. I'd like to ask what he based it on. My feeling is that, apart from any possible historical basis, the background to the story is Moses' survival of Pharaoh's campaign of infanticide amongst his Hebrew workforce. Through Moses, God goes on to work the redemption of his people (the people constitute the *son* in the original *Out of Egypt have I called my son*); Jesus is, according to Matthew, the new Moses. If he has constructed the story, I would like to question the rather incidental way he refers to the children affected: yes, he does have a quotation highlighting the grief caused by the atrocity; but his focus is on its fulfilment and mainly on Jesus' escape: are the children almost as dispensable to him as they are to Herod? One of the things this Festival does is to honour the children, holding them up, if you like, as proto-martyrs: mindful, as Paul wrote, that *God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong*.

Of course, I'm judging Matthew by the standards of our age, not his. As our Bishops have been learning, there is now a strong emphasis on listening to the voice of the victim (or survivor, whichever term they prefer). Ignoring their suffering, at the time and, in the case of abuse, for their future lives, is part of the original crime; it is then compounded when authorities have failed to pay attention in subsequent years and decades. Of course, it's uncomfortable for us to listen to the survivor: we'd probably rather avoid it if we could. If we can't, it might be convenient to cast doubt on what they are saying; or we might be more concerned about defending the institution which has let them down; or we might feel better about ourselves if we focus rather on the perpetrator.

In the case of the Massacre of the Innocents, that means Herod. But I'm mindful of Edmund Burke's saying, *All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing*. Herod didn't do the killing himself: who were the people who gave him the power to make it happen? I'd like to question them. I guess I'd find that if you were one of his henchmen, you either agreed with him or, for the sake of self-preservation, dare not disagree. Closer to our own time, Nazi Germany gives us examples both of those who concurred or *were only obeying orders* and of those who were courageous enough to resist Hitler's regime, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

When it comes to accounts of abuse, we see how easy it is for those around not to see (or choose not to see) what is playing out among them – or even what they have got caught up in themselves. One of the objectives of safeguarding is to make us all more aware: to reduce the possibility of the organisation being deaf and blind to abuse in its midst. Hence the concentration on spotting the signs, paying attention to any disclosure, taking it seriously and passing it on to a safeguarding officer. It's also about demonstrating to those who are sceptical about our willingness or ability to do that, that we really are serious about this. That's why office-holders in the Church are now required to do safeguarding training and to keep it current. It's part of our response to those who have suffered from the Church's failures in the not too distant past.

Finally, I find I have some questions for God – and therefore, as Job discovered when he questioned God, for myself. He was able to divert the wise men from returning to Herod, but failed to prevent the king from murdering the children. Maybe that was because, unlike Herod's henchmen, the wise men were receptive to God's voice. If God could have foreseen that, would it have been better if he'd allowed the wise men to spill the beans? Sacrificing his Son to preserve all those innocent children? Would that have forestalled the salvation of the world? Jesus in John would have said, *My hour has not yet come*. What is it about Jesus' death as a 33-year old man that wouldn't have been effective as a 1-year old child? I suppose some sense that Jesus consciously chose his path; together with the message that he died for all, not just for a chosen few. Perhaps part of the answer (if there is an answer) is that innocent suffering is a feature of our world: we should do what we can to prevent it, but we will never eradicate it; what we must do (like Matthew) is seek to tell the greater story, unfolding even in its presence.