

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday 28 December, 2025 – First Sunday of Christmas
Feast of the Holy Innocent
Readings – Jeremiah 31:15-20 & Matthew 2:13-end

Three days ago we celebrated Christmas! Even the secular world could not escape the infectious joy of the season. Smiles were shared with abandon with the greetings of “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays”. Christmas is a time of happiness and laughter, a time for merriment and good cheer, a time for blocking out, at least temporarily, all the unpleasant and painful aspects of life.

But today, December 28, our liturgical calendar celebrates the Feast of the Holy Innocent with our Gospel reading reporting one of the most tragic events of the first century. I don’t think that there is any event in the Bible that could be further removed from a cheerful celebration mood.

This passage from Matthew is probably one of the least preached passages in the Bible, and it’s not hard to see why. No sooner than the angels have returned to heaven, the shepherds have returned to their fields, and Joseph and Mary are about to return home from Bethlehem, when an angel warns Joseph to take the mother and child and flee to Egypt. And, hard on Joseph’s heels come Herod’s soldiers, killing every male child two years and under, in Bethlehem, and all the territory surrounding it.

It’s a passage I’ve never preached before but I assure you that it’s not my intention to leave you in tears, my intention is to lead you to the joy of Christ. This horrific episode is just as much a part of the Christmas season as the manger scene. Though grim, the fate of the Innocents shows us how we share the hope they had in Christ’s second advent.

But, first, imagine the sorrow of those mothers in Bethlehem: Jeremiah foretells this event in chapter 31:15 “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.” Is there any comfort, is there any hope, for these mothers of Bethlehem? Yes, there is. And that comfort and hope is embodied in the one baby boy who escaped the massacre of Bethlehem. The One who is Emmanuel – God with us!

Herod’s slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem is a horrifying, brutal, and tragic story. Yet it comes during the Christmas season every year. Why? I am sure there are many reasons but today I’m focussing on just one.

Matthew introduces the theme of kingship at the opening of chapter 2. The wise men ask Herod where the king of the Jews has been born. Matthew repeatedly refers to Herod as the king. Therefore, drawing our attention to two types of king and two types of kingdom – the kingship of Herod versus the kingship of Jesus and also the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of heaven.

The kingship of Herod is harsh and cruel. His tyrannical rule is characterised by an all-consuming desire to preserve his own status and power. Herod will stop at

nothing, including the murder of innocent children to realise his self-serving goals. We don't need to look far before we see the Herod in many of today's rulers, political leaders, leaders of society, organisations and corporations.

The nature of Jesus' kingship, on the other hand, is gentle and loving and like a shepherd, he saves his people from destruction. Jesus reigns as king over his people by dying for them to save them from their sins.

The contrast between the kingship of Herod and the kingship of Jesus cannot be more pronounced. Jesus gives his life for the sake of others; Herod takes the lives of others for his own sake.

The tension between the kingdom of Herod and the kingdom of Jesus points to the conflict between the kingdom of this world – marked by desire for power and self-aggrandisement on the part of evil people everywhere, and the kingdom of God. There was evil in the world at the time of Christ. And there is evil in our world today. It is poignant that the life of the Man of Sorrows began with the sound of weeping in the streets of Bethlehem. Jesus was very much part of the suffering then as he is part of the suffering in our world today.

Eli Weisel, a survivor of a German concentration camp and author in his book titled, "Night", he told of a horrific execution by the German guards. They were forced to watch these executions, and as the last person died, one of the men behind Weisel cried out, "You say there is a God? Then where is he? Where is he now?" Weisel said, "I turned back and looked at him and said, "There he is. He is hanging at the end of a rope."

The effects of sin, suffering and death will not cease on this side of heaven. So where is the hope, where is the comfort? It is here in the story of the Holy Innocents. It is here, with us at HTS today – Emmanuel, God with us, because we know a day is coming when all the strife will cease and all the crying will end. On that day, the eyes of the mothers of Bethlehem will be dried. On that day, the tears of those who have suffered at the hands of evil dictators, past, present and in years to come, will cease to flow. On that day, you and I who mourn because of our earthly sorrows, will rejoice forever in our heavenly reward. That is the comfort that carries us through all our Christmases. That is the promise that makes Christmas truly Merry, that is the joy that never fails and never fades away!

In the joy of Christ, let us go into the coming year holding on tightly to what the Lord who loves us has told us in Isaiah 60. We say together as personalised on the screen:

"(I will) arise and shine for (my) light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon (me). See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon (me) and his glory appears over (me)." Amen.

Dolapo Ogunbawo