

The grace, mercy, peace, and joy of Christ Jesus be yours this day. The title for today’s sermon is ‘Holy Innocents’ based on the commemoration for today and the Gospel, reading from Matthew chapter 2. Let us pray.... Amen.

I’ve seen all kinds of Christmas decorations, from Santa to stars, from to musical houses with lights, to nativity scenes, but in all the places I’ve lived, all the houses I’ve seen, and all the streets I’ve travelled, never have I seen a house or lawn decorated for this Christmastime observance in the Church Year. My guess is, the Commemoration of the Holy Innocents, does not fit the mindset of cheeriness most people have for the Christmas season. To openly remember the Holy Innocents would reveal the much darker side of humanity revealed after our Saviour’s birth.

The Gospel reading designated for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas, is from the Gospel of St. Luke 2:22-40, when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple, to present Him to the Lord and offer a sacrifice. That reading presents more of the festive joy of the season as we hear about how Simeon and Anna jubilantly come up to Jesus and His parents. To Jesus’ parents surprise those two older fixtures of the Jerusalem temple would tell them, and all in earshot, the good news: the long promised Saviour of the world had finally arrived.

We rejoice with Simeon as we speak, or sing, the Nunc Dimittis: “**Lord, now You let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word, for my eyes have seen the salvation that You have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Your people Israel.**”(Luke 2:29-32) We like the aged prophetess Anna, who like a joyous grandma, gives thanks to God and tells everyone waiting for the redemption of Israel about Jesus, the Redeemer who’d finally arrived. We like to hear joyous thing during Christmas because this season is supposed to be all about joy, and thanksgiving, and rejoicing. At least that is what we are told by the likes of Hallmark, Walmart, and the likes.

But even in the midst of all the praising and rejoicing in the temple, Simeon took time to speak some disturbing words to Mary, words often missed or ignored. While still holding the infant Jesus, Simeon said to Mary: “**Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.**”(Luke 2:34-35) Before Jesus’ infancy narrative ends, His cross is already casting its shadow over Him.

Most people do not want their most inner thoughts to be revealed, as those same thoughts would reveal the state of their soul. Herod’s thoughts were revealed through His actions in today’s Gospel reading. The thought that he may lose the power and control he most coveted, revealed the extent he was also willing to go in order to maintain his power and control. Along with showing what was in Herod’s heart, he revealed a little of what is in each of our human hearts as well. Looking at Bethlehem, it isn’t pretty.

Jesus’ rejection is foretold and the opposition to Him and His mission is already clear. A sword will eventually also pierce Mary’s soul and cause her great sorrow when she will witness the crucifixion, suffering, and death of Her innocent Son, as also too soon, many mothers’

hearts’ in Bethlehem would be pierced as they witnessed the first group of martyrs in the New Testament, their own young sons.

The birth of the Messiah, the Christ, the King of Israel, which we celebrate at Christmas each year, also shows us the darkness of our fallen world. Christmas shows the dark side of humanity. The reason for the season is not so much about Christ glorified, for Christ did not have to come into our world for His own glory. The reason for the season is we, His creation, were dead in our individual guilt, sins, and trespasses. Christmas reveals the darkness our Lord and Saviour was born into: the light of His presence came into the absolute darkness of this world to reveal just how far we have fallen. We live in a world where the corruption of sin has completely slaughtered and destroyed any of the good Adam and Eve were first created in. The events which shortly followed Christ’s Mass, Jesus’ birth, most clearly shows us the reality and severity of our sin.

Christmas and its season reveal what most people would like to keep in the dark; that we are also sinners, lost and groping around in the darkness of this world, and unable to save ourselves.

In today’s Gospel, and the reason for the commemoration, or festival (but festival just doesn’t sound right considering what horrors of what happened), is, as we heard, Herod choose to have all the boys in Bethlehem, two years old and younger, killed in his quest to rid himself of all who would threaten his rule and reign as king of Palestine. What is most haunting in that Bethlehem slaughter is we can see ourselves in these attacks on Christ, and start to better understand why it all had to happen- Herod is just like us

Herod is really just like you and me.

Now you may say, “Hold on for a second, that is not true, I would never actively order the execution of dozens of young boys.” Now that may be true, but take a really good look deep down in your heart, in the dark recesses of your soul, and in your thoughts, words, and actions. When someone does something that directly negatively impacts you, what is your first thought and response. Do you pray for them, or do you go over a few scenarios in your mind which involve some form of divine retribution or retaliation? Do your words emotionally kill, do your actions and inaction destroy lives, families, friends, or children?

Never mind others, what do you do when Christ and His teaching hit you right between the eyes and when they threaten your “comfort zone”. What happens when you hear you are a sinner, that perhaps what you enjoy doing is a reprehensible offense against God, or when realize just how much and how seriously you have offended God and what He demands by your words, actions, and thoughts. Too often we want to do away with all of Christ that threatens our “comfort zone.” We would much rather a Jesus who bows down to us and to our demands. We would much rather a Jesus who is only there to make us feel good about ourselves and not to show us our dark side or who we are without Him. When our idols of control, power, self-reliance, health, and/or earthly treasures are threatened, do we go on the offensive? Do you try to eliminate the threat?

Now you may still say, “I am nothing like Herod”.

I find it strange, we get saddened and upset when we hear of the dozens of young boys slaughtered in Bethlehem on the pretense of a king’s right to choose, but are silent, and even at times supportive of the daily slaughter of thousands of infants in Canada on the pretense of a woman’s right to choose. We get rather self-righteous and claim we would never have let Jesus be born in stable because there was no room for them in the inn, we would most definitely have given His parents our room and stayed out in the shed, yet there are still so many who go without housing, clothing, and food in our world today.

We are just like Herod.

When our earthly stuff is threatened, or when it is revealed to us that our possessions, our power, our control, our self-sufficiency are mere illusions, we too want that truth covered up and disposed of quickly. When our sins are brought into the light we would rather pull them back into the dark than to address them and repent in the light. But this is exactly what Christ came to do; to be with sinners in the mud and grime of their daily lives. We do well today to remember the Holy Innocents who were killed, and even more so our sins which caused our Savior to be born in the attached shed, to have to flee to Egypt, to have to hear the wails from Bethlehem from the parents of the slain, to have to come and suffer and live and die for us. The Innocent One for the guilty, for you and me.

Now, you may wonder why, in this “season of joy and happiness” we have in the Church Year the commemoration of the murder of St. Stephen, and then, a couple days later, today, the commemoration of the murder of young children. It is a gloomy note to strike during this happy time!

But one thing about Christ and the Christian Faith is it is realistic. It does not “make believe” that we can simply wish away evil, or ignore it. Instead, as did Christ, we deal with it, head-on, in all its brutal tragedy. These little children were slaughtered, while the Son of God, went free. Such it always is with the ways of Satan. He wants nothing more than to destroy and corrupt what God has declared good. And so, even while our Lord was not yet two-years-old, the agents of Satan came after Him. But, His time had not yet come, and God provided a way of escape. In high divine irony, Jesus escaped back to the land where God’s people had been enslaved so long before, and out of Egypt, God called his Son (Hosea 11:1). God called His son forth to come back to the land where He was born, in order to continue His divine mission of the salvation of the world. And that is exactly what Jesus came to do.

Jesus was born into this world for one, and only one purpose: to save sinners. It would not be pretty, it would not be easy. The Light came into the darkness and the darkness hated Him. The Saviour came into save His people and His own despised Him. The Redeemer came in redeem people from their sins and the people choose their sin over Him. Merry Christmas.

But still Jesus came, His still lived, His carried your sins and mine from His conception, through the waters in the Jordan, around the Judean countryside, and up to Jerusalem. Jesus went while His disciples urged Him not to go. The devil attacked Him in many different ways to try to stop Him, but each time Jesus escaped and carried on to Calvary. In the end, Jesus carried your sins, my sins, and the sins of the whole world to the cross and there satisfied the justice

rightly due for our transgressions: He gave His life for all: for Herod and even his sin of killing the Bethlehem youth, for Pharaoh’s sins including his slaughter of the Hebrew children in the Nile, Jesus also came for those murdered children, He also came for Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin for their attacks and slaughter of millions, for ISIS members and other terrorists for all their crimes, for child molesters and serial killers, for adulterers, murderers, thieves, liars, coveters, idolaters, and slanderers; in short Jesus came for you, and me. Jesus came and paid for all their sins, as He paid for all of yours. We like to point away from ourselves to someone worse, but that is simply the pot calling the kettle “black”; denying the grace and forgiveness Christ has already earned for us. The reality is we are sinners. We have sinned. We have killed with our words, thoughts, actions, and inactions. We have bowed down to other gods. We have broken all of God’s commandments, and have done it repeatedly. Give thanks, God sent forth His Son into our world to save sinners and to redeem us back to Himself.

This Christmas season we can look at the ugliness and the beauty of this season knowing our Saviour who came into the slum of our world to redeem us and save us out of it. We can stand in His Light and repent of all our sins because He came for each of us, and our forgiveness was secured for us by His death and resurrection. He has come for us, has baptized us by water and His Word, and where He clothed us with His righteousness, forgives us all our sins, has delivered us from death, and the devil, and has given us eternal life. The Christmas season is not about lights, decorations, family, or even warm and fuzzy feelings. It is about Jesus who came to save sinners: you and me. This Jesus continues to come to us, be with us, and carry us through the darkness of this fallen world in His Light and life; suffering with us as we suffer, weeping with us as we weep, and rejoicing with us in His peace. While the darkness may try to overshadow us, Christ promises His Light, His Life and His salvation to all who believe. In Christ Jesus, our Saviour we do have the joy which never fades, thanksgiving for all He has done, and rejoicing, Jesus! Amen.

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