

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under

What are we to make of these children on December 28th, a day designated long ago to observe the Feast of the Holy Innocents? It is an observance that the Church has largely come to ignore. The reasons are varied. Emotionally, it doesn't fit easily into the festive mood this season presumes. Intellectually, historians have questioned this story's authenticity, arguing that the massacre is not recorded elsewhere. To me, it is a judgment that ignores a singular hard truth. In any age, the death of the poor or those outside circles of privilege or familiarity can be easily expunged from the record. The act certainly parallels Herod's documented murder of rivals, one wife and several sons included. But Herod is not why this story stands in Matthew. The story of the Innocents cries out to be heard if we are to fully comprehend this season and its other Child.

Bethlehem's massacred children witness to the violence done to children and innocents in every time by those obsessed with position or awash in power. What Herod did was despicable, but not unique. Children continue to be the ones most vulnerable and most easily victimized. Sandy Hook, Uvalde, Parkland, come to mind. The euphemism of "collateral damage" is a travesty for what happens to children in Ukraine or Gaza or Sudan. Or for the deaths resulting when food and medicine provided by USAID is ended in the name of "government efficiency." Scholars can argue against the historicity of Herod's act until they turn blue in the face. The fact is: Matthew's is a truth-telling story of what happens too often to this world's innocents.

The irony of Matthew's Christmas story is that the Christ Child lives because innocent children once died in his stead. Not by their own choice, but because Herod's rage at a toddler-rival fell upon these children. One wonders: as Jesus expends himself in ministry and ultimately on the cross, does he remember stories told to him by his parents? Stories of dreams and warnings, of a hasty flight, of children who suffered dearly? Such remembrances could have deepened Jesus' empathy for and honoring of the children among us. To such as these innocents, Jesus later taught, belong God's sovereign realm. For such as these, we remember.

For Reflection and Action:

*What does this story reveal to you: about God; about the world; about ourselves?
Complete the sentence: the story of the Holy Innocents is important for the Church because...*