

Pain at Christmas

28 12 14

Heavenly Father,
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod
though they had done no wrong:
by the suffering of your Son
and by the innocence of our lives
frustrate all evil designs
and establish your reign of justice and peace.

Our text today may be found in Jeremiah chapter 31 and verse 15:

‘Thus says the Lord:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentations and bitter weeping
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children
because they are no more.’

What I love about Christmas is the warmth and joy and fun of being together at a cold and dark time of the year, to celebrate together a special moment in the story of our world, the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, the baby Jesus being born to his mother Mary in the stable of an inn in Bethlehem, him being wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, reports of angels with glad tidings telling shepherds of his birth and wise men coming from the east, following a

star, carrying gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh to worship him. It is a good time. It is a happy time. Don't you love it ?

But amid our celebrations comes today, the 28th December, which marks the massacre of the Holy Innocents. Let me remind of what you have just heard in today's gospel from Matthew. Herod has been tricked by the wise men who wisely failed to return to Jerusalem to tell him of the whereabouts of the boy born to be king. Infuriated, Herod dispatches some soldiers to go down to Bethlehem and kill all boy children aged 2 and under. They do but not before Joseph, warned by an angel in a dream, has already left with Mary and the baby Jesus to find refuge and safety in Egypt.

And so to today's quotation from Jeremiah which Matthew uses as one of his proof texts to show that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, that Jesus fulfils what has been written about him in the Old Testament. Here, at the time of the exile into Babylon, Jeremiah is imagining something extraordinary: that a woman, long dead, Rachel, the wife of the patriarch Jacob, is weeping inconsolably over the death of her children. Jacob was the son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham and it seems appropriate that one of his wives, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, centuries later should be grieving over the slaughter of some of her 'children'. To Matthew's mind, the weeping of these distraught mothers in Bethlehem for their dead sons finds an apt parallel in Jeremiah's poetic lamentation.

What it costs for Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ, is sometimes lost in the general joy of Christmas. We are apt to forget that though

the birth of a baby is usually the cause of real joy, the actually process of giving birth is not called 'labour' for nothing. I am a man and I can only imagine the pain involved in the passage of a child being born, slipping from the mother's womb into the air outside. If you have been a mum then you will know far better than I what is involved. Painful, I guess, sounds like an understatement.

What today reminds us of in remembering the death of the Holy Innocents is the pain and cost of belief that can be overlooked at this time of joy. In our minds and memories, Easter is still a long way off. Before the joy of the resurrection inevitably comes the pain of the cross.

What I find convincing about our faith is that it is real. It is not a fairy story though there is the promise that we can all live happily ever after. What I find useful is what we believe reminds us of the darker side of life which exists alongside the joy. We can't have one without the other. The true gift wisdom brings is how to embrace both – how to make sense of living. To do so, we need to discover a right attitude, a right way of thinking, a right mindfulness, if we are to make sense of both laughter and tears.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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