

Sunday 28th December 2025; Benefice Holy Communion
Oswaldkirk

Some words from the Book of Jeremiah quoted in today's Gospel,

'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

In my work as a chaplain, I often think of these words when blessing babies who had not reached their beginning or had died soon after birth. For their parents there is no hope, no consolation, just sadness because their baby is no more and I am asked to bring some relief to that sadness in what I say and do for them.

Today on Holy Innocents, we pay tribute to the innocent and the vulnerable. Many who read this account of the retribution of Herod, would perhaps edit it out, because it describes awful suffering of children and inconsolable grief. Yet, God, in his infinite wisdom, determined that the story of the birth of Christ could not only survive, but be enhanced by Herod's murder of the young baby boys. These children who are killed tell us that when we are baptized into Christ, we also become vulnerable, as Jesus did as He grew and followed His calling to be our saviour. Some may rather not be vulnerable because to be vulnerable is to take risks, and to take risks means that sometimes losses and sorrow will follow.

But the children in this passage of scripture are more than vulnerable, they are also innocent. Here in Bethlehem at the first Christmas, there is not only the sound of rejoicing but seemingly drowning it out is another sound of grief and

sadness, the shout of those who are vulnerable being hurt, a shout of weeping when the innocent are victimized and cruelly slain. So, what can we learn from this passage of sadness?

Firstly, in our world, the innocent do suffer. The innocent children who died at the hands of Herod are considered the first martyrs of the Christian faith, or sometimes the “bud of the martyrs.”, not blood, you will notice, but B-U-D. They are little buds that have not had a chance to blossom. A bud is a beautiful picture of innocence, beautiful in and of itself, but also because of the potential. These children are the buds of the martyrs; the first of the martyrs for Jesus Christ and today we remember all children who are slaughtered innocently by governments and governors, forgotten by society. We cannot say why it happens, but we can acknowledge it does happen, notice that life is sometimes cruel in the world we live in and we are all part of a Fallen world where innocent children and people, through no fault of their own, suffer in a myriad of ways. So, how can we respond?

We are called to weep for and shout for the innocent, see their potential, admire the bud before it blossoms, to be advocates for them and where there is no answer, just be alongside them. For those who come among us looking for comfort, when we cannot always give a reasonable answer, we can give ourselves. We can weep; we can shout in lament. We can offer a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear. We can recognize and honour the bud that has not yet blossomed. We can provide a place for healing because we carry the hope that there is a bigger picture,

that there is Good News.

God sent his son into the world as a child to highlight the vulnerability of a child but also His power. Herod ordered the killing of the children for the very purpose of stopping the rise of another king, but God's reign cannot be stopped by a madman. What was true then is still true. Power hungry leaders, world events, the global economy, wars and rumours of wars will not stop the reign of God. Jesus was born in a manger, He lived a perfect life revealing His Father's love, He died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins and was raised to new life. He ascended into heaven and He is coming again.

The purpose of this text for today, the commemoration of the Holy Innocents, is to remember the vulnerable, the helpless, and to take action to come alongside them, to bring a measure of comfort and of dignity. May we be a church where our safeguarding and our giving demonstrate we are a community that looks out and seeks to care, and organizes itself in such a way that the vulnerable are protected, and in keeping with the scriptures, we can have confidence that in spite of the suffering of the innocent in our world today, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ continues and is certain and true.

Thanks be to God. Amen.