

Reflection on the Holy Innocents

Text: Matthew 2:16-18

Pastor Bob Phillips

December 28, 2008

If a list ever is produced on the ten most troubling passages in the Bible, this story would make that list. In preparing for this message, I tried to research it in the usual ways. I pulled down a thousand-page book of New Testament theology. Since the New Testament has at most 250 pages, that amounts to four pages of comment for every page of text. *This* story was not mentioned. In all my life I have yet to hear a sermon or Sunday school lesson about this story.

There is a reason. It is the story with which Matthew's Gospel concludes its account of Christmas. After the warm tale of the manger, the wise men and the star, Matthew signs off with a horrible story of murder. In the tradition of the church, it has come to be known as the slaughter of the Holy Innocents.

The story is simple. King Herod had directed the Wise Men to tell him where this new "King of the Jews" was born, that he also might come and worship. He lied. He sought the child in order to slay him. But the Wise Men lived up to their billing. After finding and worshipping the infant Jesus, they heeded a warning from God and slipped out the back door without telling Herod anything. At the same time, God warned Joseph in a dream to get out of town at once. So he bundled up mother and child and left, probably on foot, for safety in Egypt, where they would spend a couple of years in hiding.

When Herod the fox realized he had been outfoxed, he exploded, ordering his henchmen to butcher every male child under the age of 2 in and around the village of Bethlehem. It was done. This horrifying tale of murder near the manger concludes with the haunting reference from Jeremiah:

"A voice crying in Ramah,
Rachel weeping for her children,
for they are no more."

Some say it didn't happen. Matthew made it up to invent added proof that Jesus was the Messiah. There is no record outside of the Bible of such an atrocity. Some say it just isn't true.

There are problems with that response. There is no outside record in secular history of *most* of the actions of King Herod. Bethlehem was a small village of perhaps 200 souls. While the murder of perhaps twelve infants and toddlers is terrible by any measure, in those violent times it would not have raised more than a shrug in official circles. Indeed, how many governments would want to have this type of action officially recorded?

The murders were consistent with the character of Herod. He murdered his wife, his mother-in-law, and two of his sons. After a bad staff meeting, he had his staff eliminated, by which I don't mean simply "laid off."

If Matthew was trying to invent fresh proofs that Jesus was the Messiah, this story makes no sense. The passage cited from Jeremiah had no link whatsoever to notions of the Messiah in Jewish thinking. The atrocity stains this otherwise gentle account. If

Matthew was inventing the story of Jesus' birth, this addition would make no sense. Of all the events surrounding the birth and life of Jesus, 95% of which we do not know, why would Matthew include this unless prompted by the event itself and by the Spirit of God?

This tale of the murder of the children is a reminder that *evil is profoundly real*. We say that evil is real in the same sense we can recite the bumper sticker slogan that "Nobody's perfect." But that ditty usually comes with fine print that reads, "Nobody's perfect, but so-and-so is more imperfect than I, or I am not as fouled up as so-and-so." Thus we acknowledge evil without confronting it; we admit it exists without confessing its power.

One of the common threads in the so-called new age religions and in popular cotton candy feel-good versions of Christianity is the absence of what is called a "doctrine of sin." To these bubbas, evil is unreal, a misunderstanding, a series of bad "engrams" that for \$199.95 a pop, the official Scientology engram-o-meter will filter out one by one.

Several years ago, the novelist Kurt Vonnegut interviewed the Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi during the heyday of his popularity as guru for Transcendental Meditation. Vonnegut was a lapsed Unitarian, which takes some real effort, but retained a familiarity with certain classic Christian teachings consistent with any well-read person. During the interview, Vonnegut learned from the Mahareshi that the cause of problems, sins and evil in the world is a failure to meditate. Nothing is *really* wrong. Folks just don't do enough TM. That, added the Mahareshi, was why Jesus got himself crucified. Had he only meditated more and interfered less with others, the cross never would have happened.

Vonnegut commented that after the interview he was tempted to look around for any sort of crucifix, stand in front of it, wave his finger at the figure of Jesus hanging on that cross, and hiss, "I know the problem with you. You just didn't...meditate." He said this tongue-in-cheek, for he added that after talking with the Mahareshi, he left with the highest respect for Jesus he had ever known. And he realized that the reason so many celebrities of the late 1968's, such as the Beatles and Mia Farrow, were flocking to the Mahareshi instead of to Jesus was that if they went to Jesus, he would tell them to give away their money.

The Bible is consistent and emphatic that evil is profoundly real. It is not an absence of meditation, or any of the popular substitutes eagerly devoured by a culture in moral denial. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart were only evil continually...There is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not...All we, like sheep, have gone astray...for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." These are a few of the hundreds of references in scripture to the profound reality of evil. There is something of the spirit of Herod in each of us.¹

This story also is a reminder that *Christ can be profoundly hated*. Herod's vicious response to the birth of Christ was rooted in hatred for what Christ represents, what he could do, what he could mean for Herod and for others. Herod was absolutely, emphatically not interested in any of it; rather, his was an active and ugly response of hatred that drenched this innocent village in blood.

I confess reluctance to make this point, since it is liable to abuse. Even in the early church, there were those who sought martyrdom as an instant ticket to heaven by

¹ The references are from Genesis 6, Ecclesiastes 7, Isaiah 53 and Romans 3.

entering pagan temples during their worship, kicking over their stuff, cursing their gods and daring the infuriated congregation of pagans to do something about it. Since lots of those folks came to church heavily daggered, they would do something on the spot. It got so bad that church leadership declared that a Christian who chose death rather than to renounce their faith was a martyr. A Christian who went out of his way to pick a fight with pagans and got whacked as a result might go to heaven, but then again he might only go to wherever stupid people go when they die.

Times have changed and not changed. Some today see vast right wing conspiracies; others, especially in the era of Senator McCarthy and his ilk, saw vast left wing conspiracies. And there are sincere Christians who see vast satanic conspiracies in the public schools, businesses, courts and culture. As George Carlin has pointed out, Santa is “Satan” spelled inside out. There are people who find that too true to be funny.

When I saw that this story is a reminder that Jesus can be profoundly hated, I am not talking about understandable reactions of non-Christians to holier-than-thou, in-your-face, spiritually constipated hyper-believers. I am not convinced there are nearly as many of this type of Christian as the media portrays, but some do exist.

I refer to a deeply rooted aversion for Jesus. I speak of the surprising number of people who have no clear religious convictions of any sort except the fierce conviction that Jesus is not the Christ. They may or may not believe in God, have any familiarity with the Bible, or pray or be able to express a clear moral code, but by golly, they know who Jesus was not.

Jesus said, “Blessed are you when others shall revile you and curse you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for that is how they treated the prophets in whose steps you follow...Do not be surprised if the world hates you, for before it hated you, it hated me...and this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates and light and refuses to come to the light, lest what they are and do become clear to all.”²

Jesus warned us this would be so. If you take him and his words seriously, some will rejoice. They will encourage your change in values, in outlook, in compassion, and in your involvement. Others, however, will turn on you, some with a surprising and almost irrational disdain or anger. Again, I am not talking about using the gospel as a flat-edged shovel to whack people with our own self-righteousness. The simple commitment to take Jesus seriously as Christ and Lord will bring you face to face with the spirit of Herod that still seeks the child in order to slay him.

There is a final reminder in this story, a piece of good news amid the tragedy of this tale. *The last word rests with God.* Herod sought to kill Jesus and failed. Hatred sought to silence Jesus, and failed. The opposition of the world, the flesh and the devil sought to derail Jesus, and failed. The baby of Bethlehem lived to maturity. He lived to teach us in his words and actions the kind of life God intends his children to lead. In hearing and responding in faith to his words, we fill in the content of what it means to call Jesus, “Lord.”

He died, but in his own good time and way, and in fulfillment of the Father’s purpose set for him on the cross. In his death, “bearing our sins in his body on the tree,” he broke the back of evil and trumped the spirit of hatred that put him there. And, on a

² The references are from Matthew 5, John 15 and John 3.

Sunday we call Easter, God had the last word in the form of an everlasting laugh, an empty tomb, and a droll angel telling the clueless disciples that if they are looking for Jesus, a cemetery is the last place to find him!³

The story of the Holy Innocents is part of the Gospel for a reason. There may not be any books or many sermons produced about this tragedy. I doubt there will ever be a song, classic or modern, that deals with this painful part of the Christmas story. To those tempted by the denial of evil into a religion sentimental and sweet, the story is a reminder that evil is profoundly real. To those who honestly expect everyone to applaud a resolution of faith to live seriously for Jesus, the story is a reminder that Jesus can be profoundly hated, and so can his followers.

The story of the Holy Innocents also is a reminder that the last word rests with God, not with evil or hate or the Herods of the world or the spirit of Herod that may tug within our own heart. The last word rests with God and with the baby not slain among the innocents of that terrible night. The last word rests with God and with his Christ, and that word, that Easter word, is “victory.” Amen.

³ The reference is from 1 Peter 2.