

Holy Innocents

a sermon preached on

Holy Innocents Day

28 December 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Jeremiah 31: 15-17; 1 Corinthians 1: 26-29; Matthew 2: 13-18

In today's gospel we read of two journeys; the hurried escape into Egypt and then the return to the land of Israel to the town of Nazareth.

The journey into Egypt was a flight to safety.

In Jewish history, Egypt was a land of refuge for those who were fleeing from persecution. Jacob once found refuge in Egypt. Later his son Joseph found safety there from his jealous brothers, who, in turn, were driven to Egypt in their search for food. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army, Egypt had become the home of many dispersed Jews. It is said that in the city of Alexandria there were as many as one million Jewish exiles.

The second journey in this story, the one out of Egypt back to Israel, was necessary due to King Herod's insecurity and jealousy in that he believed that this baby Jesus was a threat to him, a threat to his rule and power. Herod became so obsessed with this belief that he ordered the massacre of all the male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under. This conflict between the birth of Jesus (the Messiah) and the authorities whose current grip on power becomes threatened, is developed into a series of scenes that make the infant Messiah and his family, refugees, exiles, returnees and eventually settlers in Nazareth, which was not their original home. The family of Jesus had to yield before forces of evil and power struggle. Like refugees of today, they had no control over where they may safely live.

The plight of people who have been subjected to the power of evil has not changed much over the years. In my own country of Ireland, history tells of men, women and children dying of starvation because they refused to denounce their Roman Catholic faith in return for food from Protestant landlords.

We think of the holocaust and the persecution and murder of Jewish people in their thousands. More recently Bosnia, with its evil plan of ethnic cleansing and approximately eight thousand men and boys being slaughtered. Rwanda, with over two hundred and fifty thousand victims of genocide. Zimbabwe, with its political assassinations and men, women and children dying with disease and starvation, because of evil power and greed. Darfur, the genocide of over two hundred thousand victims.

Many more nations – many more atrocities.

There are many refugees from a number of countries who fled from persecution living among us here in New Zealand, and whilst the majority of our citizens accept them as decent hard working members of our society, there are many who are resentful of their presence among us. Sadly, some of our Christian brothers and sisters are part of this school of thought. This is all contrary to the teachings of Christ who, when asked by the Pharisees - "what is the greatest commandment?" answered – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and a second is like this – love your neighbour as yourself."

These are the values lacking in our society. The failure to love as God loves us – the failure to forgive as God forgives us – the failure to love our neighbour as commanded by Christ, and because of these failures we have increases in both family and street violence. A driver stabbed to death – a prostitute thrown into the river.

Little children being battered and murdered by parents and family members. "All God's children."

Every member of the human race is an image of God, the Creator, and there will be no peace on Earth until we live in the light of that revelation. We are called to recognise the presence of God in each other's heart, mind and body, especially in children. As Jesus pointed out, they teach us the playfulness, the trust, the freedom and the wonder of God's kingdom.

We are all called to transform humanity into God's family through the power of The Holy Spirit. This is a work of justice making, of peace making and of the liberation of all peoples.

As Christians, we are committed to contribute and experience God's grace by letting go of all the prejudices and negative emotions. Only then will be empowered by the love of God to renew the face of the Earth. Futile bitterness refused the gift of inner freedom won for us at Easter.

May the peace and love of God be in your hearts and minds as we reach out to all people with compassion and understanding.

Amen.

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