

St Peter's, Mount Park, Ealing  
Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> December 2014

### Feast Day of the Holy Innocents

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Today is a festival day to which I feel particularly attached. It is the patronal festival of my first incumbency, the first parish where I served as vicar. Holy Innocents, Kingsbury is one of only thirteen dedications to the Holy Innocents in the country. It's also not an easy patronal festival to keep coming so close on the heels of Christmas Day. Not only is it difficult to keep as a patronage because of its place in the liturgical calendar it is also not a great subject. How do you celebrate, in the midst of the Christmas festivities, a patronage based upon a massacre and a massacre of children at that? Many flinched at the prospect of focusing on such a story and instead look to the flight of the Holy Family from the murderous grip of Herod into the relative freedom of Egypt.

Churches were named Holy Innocents for a reason. Most if not all of the ones, in this country, named after the Holy Innocents were built in the Victorian era when the public conscience was turning towards the plight of children in poverty. Children had always been understood to be part of the labour force. Fields wouldn't have been planted and crops gathered without the use of child labour. With the coming of the industrial age came the growth of the use of child labour. Initially nothing was thought of children working in the factories instead of the fields.

Over time society began to realise the conditions under which children worked was becoming increasingly horrendous. The plight of children in industrialised society was dreadful with children being forced to work twelve hour days in increasingly dangerous conditions in the cotton mills, coal mines and chimneys stacks. The condition of children was an increasing public scandal and forces were in motion to bring about change.

As the new suburbs grew and churches were built some chose to use the naming of church communities as a means of highlighting the plight of children, the 'holy innocents' of the day. Sometimes this was done by using the dedication of specific child saints such as St Laurence or St Faith and on occasion, thirteen times to be precise, the dedication of the Holy Innocents was used.

The events that lead to this naming programme have unfortunately not been consigned to the history books. We hear of child soldiers in Africa, child labour in the Indian subcontinent and the Far East, the massacre of children such as in Peshawar and the plight of children in war torn regions such as Northern Iraq and Syria; nearer home we hear of child abuse, trafficking and slavery. Children continue to be the victims and defenceless focus of violence all over the world even today.

It is important that the gospel writer didn't gloss over these events, or exclude them from the biblical narrative. The story of the Holy Innocents isn't just a reason given for the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. It is not just used to make an important link with the prophecies of Jeremiah. In the midst of what could become a bit of a fairy tale story the birth of Jesus is grounded in the harsh realities of life. The grit and blood of existence in first century Israel is part of Jesus' story, it is this harsh reality that was the world of first century Israel.

Here we have then the story of salvation grounded in the reality of the world. Even in the destruction of innocent children. So often Christians are challenged with the problem of evil in the world, how can a God of love allow such bad things to happen? How can the God of all creation allow evil to exist?

Evil exists in the brokenness of our world. In the inability of humanity to place God at the centre of all things. Whenever evil happens, even in the name of God, ulterior motives and selfish concerns are the driving force for such deadly deeds. Even today, our Muslim brothers and sisters will tell you Isis' interpretation of the Qur'an is fallacious and ill guided. Herod would probably have argued what he did was for the people and the out working of God's law in the face of a usurper.

Feast days such as Holy Innocents remind us of our own frailty and brokenness in the sight of God's love in the world and challenges us to proclaim the good news of Jesus all the louder, if only to make sure these acts of inhumanity and violence don't happen again and again. That God's kingdom of love and justice is ushered in and the evil highlighted in the root of men and women's hearts is challenged and ultimately driven out.