

There are, as I may have mentioned occasionally before now, forty days in the Christmas season and twelve days of Christmas itself. Plenty of time, you would have thought, in which to celebrate Christ's birth. And yet, in the first few days after Christmas the church calendar squeezes in three major feast days which seem to have little or nothing to do with the season. On 26<sup>th</sup> December we commemorate St Stephen, on the 27<sup>th</sup> St John the Evangelist, on 28<sup>th</sup> the Holy Innocents. Then the 29<sup>th</sup> is the commemoration of Thomas Beckett. Why can't we simply get on with Christmas for a little while longer?

We do – although the outside world does not. Life is already back to normal for many people: the sales are on, the holiday brochures are available, the detox diets have started and dry January starts tomorrow. We shall keep the white vestments and the joyful hymns and psalms until Candlemas, and this year Easter is so early that we shall then fall almost directly into Lent. But the sequence of saints' days after Christmas is there for a purpose. Each adds a new aspect to the story, reminding we who accept the mystery of the incarnation of our own responsibilities to maintain and spread the faith. St Stephen was the first martyr; the first person to be killed as a direct consequence of his own profession of belief in Jesus. St John was the first great theologian, who demonstrates the importance of studying, understanding, interpreting and expounding the faith. The Holy Innocents are the sudden infusion of apparently meaningless horror, somehow even more terrible than the martyrdom of Stephen or Thomas Beckett, the twelfth-century archbishop of Canterbury who was killed on the orders of his king for maintaining the separation and independence of the church from the state.

Stephen and Thomas both knew exactly what they were doing. Their actions were considered and they knew the risks they faced. Both had the possibility of behaving differently: compromising, negotiating, reaching an accommodation with their persecutors. For each, his declared belief was more important than his life, and neither resisted the fate that had become inevitable. The Bethlehem families, on the other hand, had no such choices. They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing could have prepared them for what was to happen or allowed them to avoid it; the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream but not to them. This story raises the age-old question: How could God allow this to happen?

One of the biggest objections that secularists and atheists raise against religion and against God is the amount of violence, cruelty and war which has been carried out in his name over the centuries. How can religions which claim to have love, peace, mercy and justice as fundamental principles have led to such wickedness? Surely without religion there would have been no Crusades, no Inquisition, no pogroms, no wars of religion, no Sunni-Shia conflicts, no Amritsar massacres. How can one countenance a Christian faith in which one of the earliest recorded acts is the slaughter of all the small children in a village?

This sounds like a strong point, but a little thought shows that it contains a fundamental weakness. There is also a tremendous amount of violence, cruelty, injustice and war which has nothing at all to do with religion, the behaviour of the Nazis, Pol Pot, Stalin, Chairman Mao and the current military rulers of Burma being just a few recent examples. In some cases the savagery has taken place in circumstances where religion has been deliberately suppressed. The problem is not one of religion, but one of evil which, wherever it manifests itself, is a human characteristic. Herod was a violent and unstable man who also killed his wife, at least three of his sons, his brother-in-law and a large number of wealthy and influential Jews who opposed him. Fear, jealousy, rage and an overwhelming desire to maintain his power over-rode any other instincts he may have had, as well as the Jewish faith to which he claimed allegiance when it was

advantageous to do so. Stalin, who spent some time in a Catholic seminary before abandoning religious faith and turning to communist beliefs, imprisoned, tortured and killed to maintain his power. When popes and bishops manipulated monarchs and owned or controlled vast swathes of land they organised wars to maintain their power. When secular rulers were in control they did the same thing. These days the potentates (the ones with power) are as likely to be global corporations as national governments; they may be more subtle in their operations but the effects are the same.

Sinful humanity causes greed, cruelty, injustice, violence and war. Sinful humanity fails to intervene to alleviate oppression, poverty and ignorance. Sinful humanity frequently makes matters far worse by calling in religion as a primary or supporting justification, knowing that all scriptures contain texts which, suitably manipulated, can be used to inspire hatred of others. When God created humanity in his image he also gave us free will – the ability to make choices, and in his wisdom he decreed that we would also experience the consequences of those choices. When Jesus came in human flesh he too had free will and the ability to choose, and his humanity led him to wrestle with his choices just as Stephen and Thomas Beckett must have wrestled with theirs. We need to remember that even during episodes of the most extreme human madness, individual examples of true faith and humanity shine through, whether this is Christians singing joyful songs of faith as they entered the arena to face the lions, or Jews stepping forward to save others from the gas chambers.

There was nothing more holy or more innocent about the Bethlehem children that Herod slaughtered than any others before or since. A simple coincidence of timing and geography put them and their families in the way of a tyrant for whom status and power ranked far higher than any other consideration. Another coincidence of timing and geography makes their story particularly apposite today, alongside the thousands of others who find themselves similarly caught up in horrific events over which they have no control. It is also a warning to those who stand aside and allow evil to run unchecked. We cannot claim innocence if there is anything – however small and apparently inconsequential - we could have done which might have made a difference. Food for thought and prayer as we mull over our New Year resolutions. Perhaps this year they should not be about us – losing weight, getting fitter, finally giving up smoking – but about what we might be able to do to make a small part of the world a better, kinder, more generous, less self-obsessed place. As Edmund Burke said: “The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”