

Introduction

Today is St Stephen's Day, the first Christian martyr and our readings touch difficult subjects, so I thought I would add in the other difficult readings of the Gospel Nativity, that of the slaughter of the innocents. My reasoning for this is summed up wonderfully by Liz Gibson in Ruth Burgess's anthology 'Hay and Stardust'.

'We talk about putting Christ back into Christmas. We also need to put Herod back into Christmas. Far from spoiling the image, the Christmas story actually makes much more sense if we include the unpleasant aspects. Perhaps it's because we don't want to upset the children, because we want to shield them. But lots of bad things happen and children know about them. To include in the Christmas story the slaughter of the innocents only serves to show that Jesus was born into the real world. Horrible though it was, it's no worse than many things that happen today. When we question God's whereabouts and intentions in the catastrophes of life there are no simple answers. The Christmas story is fantastic but it's not fantasy. It's fantastic because of the good news that God became human. We can turn it into fantasy if we make it all cosy and nice and avoid the uncomfortable bits. Cosy and nice is fine for a short while; it refreshes and relaxes us. But the good news is God in the midst of the light and the darkness, giving us strength and hope for the long haul of life.'

Call to worship – Psalm 148: 1 – 2

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

Hymn StF 218

1. Unto us a boy is born!
King of all creation,
came he to a world forlorn,
the Lord of every nation.
2. Cradled in a stall was he
with sleepy cows and asses;
but the very beasts could see
that he all folk surpasses.
3. Herod then with fear was filled:
'A prince,' he said, 'in Jewry!'
All the little boys he killed
at Bethlem in his fury.
4. Now may Mary's son,
who came so long ago to love us,
lead us all with hearts aflame
unto the joys above us.
5. Omega and Alpha he!
Let the organ thunder,
while the choir with peals of glee
now renders the air asunder.

Percy Dearmer

Prayers of Praise and Confession

Almighty God, always and everywhere, magnificent enough to create all that is, humble enough to return to your creation as a vulnerable child, to a world transformed from the idyll of Eden into the dangerous and selfish place we find today. And yet, 'God is with us' is the cry throughout the years that brings comfort and strength, engenders joy and peace, and renews love and hope, so we bring our praise, pausing in our busyness, reflecting in our troubles, and marvelling at the Light of the World, the Word, returning to hearts and minds this Christmas time.

But when our words of praise are shallow or hollow and do not lead to loving deeds, please forgive us; when our loyalties are tested and we fail, please forgive us; when we act out of fear of what others may say and not out of conviction, please forgive us; when we do not give others the tolerance we expect from them, please forgive us. When our hearts condemn us, God who is greater than our hearts, and knows all things, grants us forgiveness and peace. Amen.

Reading – Matthew 2: 16 – 18

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: '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.'

Reading – Acts 6: 8 – 16; 7: 54 – 60

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel...

[Stephen speaks of his faith]

...When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

We thank you, loving God, that wherever there is difficulty, you are in the midst of it, bringing peace and clarity; wherever there is hatred and strife, you are in the midst of it bringing love and hope; wherever there is anxiety and pain, you are in the midst of it bringing comfort and calm; wherever there is complacency and selfishness, you are in the midst of it bringing challenge and chaos; where there is us, you are in the midst, with us, bringing what we need, when we need it, whatever the circumstance and situation. God is with us, not just for Christmas, but for all time and we give thanks. Amen.

Reflection

St Stephen is considered to be the first Christian Martyr, the first who died because he confessed his faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and his intention to following in Jesus' Way. You can read his full story in Acts 6 and 7, I have just given you the beginning and end, not all his words, his reasoning, his convictions. But I believe he is not the first martyr – instead, I think, they were the young boys, the under twos who Herod in a fit of rage, fear, and insecurity had killed to try and rid himself of the fulfilling of the prophecy of a new king of the Jews. The unwitting martyrs, who died because of Jesus, even though they and their families probably never knew. But in the end, nothing was achieved, these deaths, these murders were senseless. Stephen's death served only to increase the followers of Jesus and even to cause the conversion of Saul/Paul, the greatest evangelist in Christianity, and the slaughter of the innocents did not kill Jesus.

I am sorry to harp on about death on the day after Christmas, but it is the real world that we live in. Innocents are killed because they say something someone else doesn't like, that person feels slighted, disrespected, afraid; they want to show their power and reach, they are narcissistic, uncaring, selfish. This is the world Jesus was born into, and the world we still inhabit. We hear and read everyday on the news of senseless individual killings and mass slaughters, including children, even at Christmas, sometimes especially at Christmas. But this is why we need Christmas.

The prophet Isaiah, when speaking of the Messiah to come calls the Christ 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace', but starts the passage (Isaiah chapter 9) by saying 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them the light has shined.' We call Jesus the Light of the World, as described at the beginning of John's Gospel (John 1: 3a – 9)

...What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

We know that in the physical darkness, a light can be seen from miles away, it gives a sense of hope, of safety, a promise of warmth and comfort, a guarantee of another person who has lit the light so that we can see it, find our way. A great metaphor in all times of physical, spiritual, or mental darkness, but also a real, practical help.

In these dark evenings I like to light a candle as dusk falls; we decorate our Christmas trees with lights (and tinsel and baubles which reflect the light); we count down the Sundays in Advent with candles. Away from Christmas, we need light to function in the dark times, to see by, to work by, to keep us safe, to keep away Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), to stop us being afraid of the dark. The darkness can hold all sorts of danger, unknown things, scary things, so we need the light to move forward. And in the darkest of times, when life seems unknown, frightening, and dangerous we want a light to carry with us at all times, so that we can continue, and share it, illuminate the whole world.

So this Christmas, don't keep the Light of the World to yourselves, be brave, be bold and even in the midst difficult of times, help the light to flourish, dispel the darkness and create a new hope for all the people of the world. Amen.

Hymn StF 219 (can be sung to the tune of Christ is alive, let Christians sing)

1. We see the eyes of Mary shine,
for all the pain of birth is past.
She cradles Jesus in her arms,
her time of joy is here at last.
2. We look at Joseph's roughened hands,
his eyes are filled with tender joy.
He gently reaches for the child,
this little scrap, this baby boy.
3. How can they know? And could they guess
at love's responsibility,
that hurt would mingle with the joy
of human possibility?
4. But on this night a single star
is just enough to signal grace:
a child is born in Bethlehem
and offered for the human race.

Andrew Pratt

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, we know there is a great difference between the world as it is, and the world as you want it to be. We bring you our prayers for those of your children who are victims of the world's evil. In hope and trust, we pray for:

- those who are made fun of because they are different in some way,
- those who feel that everyone else is against them,
- those who cannot feel forgiveness because of what has been done to them

Help them to find hope and a new quality of living.

We pray for:

- those who are persecuted for their beliefs, orientation or skin colour,
- those who are the victims of rumour and fake news,
- those who suffer for the wrongdoing of other people.

Help them find the courage and strength to endure.

We pray for:

- those whose lives are filled with bitterness and hate,
- those who find it difficult to trust another person,
- those whose suffering has caused them to lose faith in you.

Help them to find new faith and a sense of purpose.

Loving God, we know that the world is not as you want it to be. We ask you to use our prayers, and use us, to help those in need. Through Jesus Christ our new-born Saviour. Amen.

Lord's Prayer – please use whichever version you prefer, or, thinking of our sister and brother Christians around the world, maybe use a language other than English.

Hymn StF 197

1. Cradled in a manger, meanly
laid the Son of Man his head;
sleeping his first earthly slumber
where the oxen had been fed.
Happy were those shepherds listening
to the holy angel's word;
happy they within that stable,
worshipping their infant Lord.

2. Happy all who hear the message
of his coming from above;
happier still who hail his coming,
and with praises greet his love.
Blessèd Saviour, Christ most holy,
in a manger thou didst rest;
canst thou stoop again, yet lower,
and abide within my breast?

3. Evil things are there before thee;
in the heart, where they have fed,
wilt thou pitifully enter,
Son of Man, and lay thy head?
Enter, then, O Christ most holy;
make a Christmas in my heart;
make a heaven of my manger:
it is heaven where thou art.

4. And to those who never listened
to the message of thy birth,
who have winter, but no Christmas
bringing them thy peace on earth,
send to these the joyful tidings;
by all people, in each home,
be there heard the Christmas anthem:
praise to God, the Christ has come!

George Stringer Rowe

Blessing

Bless us all in our present
and in our futures,
as we walk in the Way of Jesus Christ,
God incarnate, Emmanuel. Amen.

