

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	28 December 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Feast of the Holy Innocents
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

Today's festival of the Holy Innocents, when Herod killed the newborn boys of Bethlehem may seem to strike a jarring note in our seasonal festivities. Christmas evokes warm sentiments, tender emotions, and above all joy. Baby Jesus, born in a stable, surrounded by adoring angels and shepherds and cradled on his mother's knee, is an image of joy and hope familiar to us all. That is well and good, but it only scrapes the surface of the mystery of Christ's coming.

It is worth noting that in these days after Christmas the Church commemorates martyrs, those who gave up their lives for Christ. Today it is the Holy Innocents. On Boxing Day - in the Church's calendar, St Stephens's Day - we jumped forward in time and space from the baby in the crib to the risen Lord Jesus receiving the soul of Stephen the first martyr into heaven, as his body was being stoned in Jerusalem. That was a huge leap from a newborn child to an adult Christ giving a martyr's crown to the first person killed for witnessing explicitly to him.

Why then do we put so much emphasis on suffering, death and martyrdom in these days after our Lord's birth? Is the Church just a massive Christmas-party pooper? Why do we feel the need to splatter the Christmas decorations with so much blood?

St John the Evangelist, commemorated yesterday, can help us to address that. In the magnificent prologue to his Gospel, which opens, 'In the beginning was the Word' - read on Christmas day and regularly throughout this season - John tells us that the eternal Word of God became flesh and lived amongst us, born as Jesus of Nazareth. But he also tells us that he was rejected: he came to his own and his own received him not. The light that was Jesus shone into the darkness of unbelief and was even put to death.

That rejection of God's Word is the reason why - in these days after Christmas - we cannot avoid suffering and martyrdom. From the very beginning of his life, Jesus the true light, was to be a sign that was rejected. Herod's soldiers hunted him and his parents had to flee with him into Egypt. What transpired in his infancy was completed at his end, when he was condemned to die on the cross by another tyrant, Pontius Pilate, to whom he said that he had come to bear witness to the truth.

St John tells us therefore, 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not put it out.' The light Christ brought at Christmas was the light of divine love for a world afflicted by evil, pain and distress, a world crying out for love. The adult Jesus would tell his disciples before he suffered that there can be no greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends. In the child of Bethlehem God befriended the world – a world hostile to him – by giving us the gift of his beloved only Son.

But the giving of that gift, the unveiling of that light, meant that our darkness too has been finally revealed for what it is – negative, hateful and destructive. As soon as Christ was born, dark forces conspired against him. His way of the cross began. It would lead ultimately to Jerusalem and death on the cross, to the apparent putting out of the light. But in God's plan it led instead to final victory over evil, to the resurrection of the light.

That revelation of the light of God's love shines like a searching spotlight into the darkness we humans create on earth. It exposes all the dark vices of greed and selfishness, anger, lust, and hatred that lurk in us when we follow our own devices, because each one of us has the capacity to be a little version of the cruel king we hear about today.

Herod was an insecure and avaricious puppet-ruler set up by the Romans and living in fear of them. He had a very shaky throne. Herod was plagued by paranoia and consumed by jealousy. He embodied hatred as he vented his anger on the innocent mothers and children of Bethlehem, in his desperate attempt to quench the light of Christ.

Frustrated by the manoeuvrings of the Magi from the East, who were after all, unlike him, wise men, and guided by an angel, Herod's urge to destroy the child whom he perceived as a rival to his power knew no limits. We know of the extent of his paranoia from later history for it is recorded that he even killed his own son. Today's Gospel tells us that in his zeal to eliminate the boy Jesus, his perceived rival, Herod sent troops to Bethlehem to kill all the firstborn baby boys whom they could find.

We can imagine them arriving like a unit of the SS in a village in Eastern Europe during the Second World War - just riding into town one day, doing their deadly work, and riding off again. And in their wake, a terrible sound was heard. It was Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be consoled because they were no more.

Great artists depicting this theme have sometimes shown a great number of children. But in the tiny village of Bethlehem, it was more likely around 15 to 20 children who were killed. No one else but the Evangelist Matthew has left a record of the event. But then why would they? These were not the offspring of the rich and famous. They were just another group of poor children – Jewish children - not even given names, remembered only as ‘the Holy Innocents.’ That is how things happened and sadly it is how things have always happened. It is happening today somewhere in the world even as I speak; and the evidence indicates that it will go on happening throughout the world until the end of time. Paranoid tyrants will always wreak havoc on the poor and innocent and vulnerable, simply because they can.

These children are included in the Church’s Christmas calendar along with explicit adult witnesses to Christ. They are lined up with St Stephen who freely endured death for Jesus and St John who followed him willingly even as far as the dangers of the cross. But can we really call these innocent slaughtered children witnesses to Christ? They were after all newborn Jewish infants, who had never heard of Jesus. Nor had their Jewish mothers ever heard of him either. How then can we commemorate them as Christian witnesses? In what way do they witness?

That is where St John’s teaching on love can help us. Of course, they were as such not explicit witnesses to Jesus. You can only bear witness explicitly to something or someone you know.

But in their suffering and death they do witness to the deepest truth that Christ came to bring. It is that the revelation of absolute love unveils the horrible face of absolute evil and the war that God’s love must wage against the darkness of sin. They are therefore witnesses both to divine love revealed and to the human hatred that God’s love comes to vanquish.

Each year this festival of the Holy Innocents reminds us therefore that where the greatest love is made known, there the greatest evil will also manifest itself. But the Christ child escaping into Egypt also reminds us that the small light of divine love kindled in his birth could not be put out. Christ will come back from Egypt. There will be a day of reckoning for evil in the light of the adult Christ’s

victory at Easter, when he will scatter the darkness of every night. And there will too be a day of judgement when the risen Lord will call all tyrants to account and glorify with his love their so many victims.

It is good therefore that amid our Christmas parties as we celebrate the holy child of Bethlehem, we should not forget his slaughtered brothers, those other children of Bethlehem, the Holy Innocents. They witnessed to the light, not by speaking but by dying. Nor should we forget their mothers and fathers nor any of those who die as innocent victims of the misuse of power. God does not forget and neither should we.