

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
5327 W. Washington Blvd.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

Holy Innocents, Martyrs (1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas)  
December 28, 2008  
Matthew 2, 13-18

## *"Mixed Emotions"*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

### Introduction

Well here we are and it is the Sunday after Christmas already. The celebrations have passed by already. That might be a cause of sadness for some, or happiness for others. Christmas is always a season of mixed emotions. There can be something a little melancholy about this time of year. Or perhaps you are just suffering from exhaustion from trying to do everything supposedly necessary to have a proper celebration of Christmas. In any event there are a wide range of emotions present at this time of year.

Perhaps it is because of this fact that the early church in its worship life chose to celebrate three special days following Christmas which certainly have as their emphasis thoughts far different at least on the surface from the celebration of Christmas. The first of these days, December 26th, celebrates St. Stephen, the martyr. The second of these days, December 27th is the day of St. John the Evangelist who ended his life as a prisoner and exile for the Christian faith. The third day after Christmas, December 28th, today, is the day reserved to commemorate the Holy Innocents, Martyrs. And so this day in our worship we remember that infamous event in the history of the Scriptures and as we consider it we are also mindful of the grace and mercy of God which conquers all things, even the evil designs of men.

### I. The Event

"The star proclaims the king is here, O Herod, why this senseless fear." So the old hymn sets the stage for the theme today. In a sense, the church calendar is a bit confused here, for next week Sunday we will celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany (and even then a few days earlier than the 12th day of Christmas, January 6th) and the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child. And the event of our text takes place immediately following that visit. The words of the Gospel lesson for this day are concise and to the point. They describe what took place very simply: When they (the wise men) had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up", he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod." These words are really the prologue to the main act of the text. They are a reminder of the protecting hand of the Lord as he guides and directs the affairs of mankind. The Lord was going to protect and keep His Son safe for the task that would be before Him. Indeed the very journey to Egypt would fulfill the words of the prophet Hosea, "Out of Egypt, I called my son." For just as the children of Israel had been called up from Egypt so also God would call His Son from Egypt.

But now we come to the heart of the text. For Herod is outraged that he has been outwitted by a company of foreigners from the East. As St. Matthew relates it: "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi." There are no real details given. We can only imagine the way this order was carried out. Perhaps bands of soldiers roamed the streets of Bethlehem or perhaps trained informers and assassins crept about seeking information to kill the children. We do not really know. In the historians of the time, this event is not even mentioned among the tyrannies and brutalities of Herod who was infamous for his violence. We can say that a man who had one of his wives and several of his sons killed because of his nearly insane jealousy would certainly be capable of such an act. He was constantly in fear of losing his throne. Luther in his comments on this event points out that Herod probably had a perfectly good explanation for what he did. He would have made this event seem not so much an act of mindless rage but a calculated act of public policy. As for the number killed, some scholars suggest six or eight boys of that age based on population statistics. Others go as high as 30 killed. It does not strike us as a large number but it was an unbelievably violent act. Yet does it say something about our day and age that we can speak of these deaths with pity and revulsion and yet more than 3000 unborn children a day lose their lives in the act of abortion which is so tragically defended by so many people as a right. What does that say about our society today?

Back to the account of the text. What we do know for certain is the sorrow that it caused. For here again, Matthew quotes the words of the prophets, the words of Jeremiah as he writes, "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more." As when the people of Israel were led off into captivity, so also here the cry is bitter and great for the loss of the children. It is interesting that the figure of Rachel is used in this quotation. Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, was buried at Bethlehem following her death. Perhaps that is the reason that this prophecy speaks of her weeping. She is symbolic of the women of Bethlehem, her figurative daughters who weep for their children who are no more.

### The Observance

That brings us to the church's observance of this day. It is called The Holy Innocents--in remembrance of these young children who were truly the first martyrs of the Christian era. They lost their lives for the sake of the Christ Child. What is sadly ironic is the fact that in all likelihood in all of these families there would have been no knowledge of the event which caused such sorrow. The king, whose life Herod sought to snuff out with this general order, was born in humble circumstances and with no public fanfare. How could they have known? Yet these children are referred to as the Holy Innocents. Yet that term might be a little confusing to us. For we believe that even children are conceived and born in sin--so how can we speak of them as the Holy Innocents? That term must have more to it than just the emotional feeling that little babies are so sweet and innocent or that they have done no wrong. Remember that Herod ordered the deaths of children up to two years old and any parent who has had a child enter the "terrible twos" might question this description of the

Holy Innocents. Yet they are holy, they are saints of God. These were children of the covenant, they were sons of Abraham by the rite of circumcision. They were part of God's people. They belonged to him. They were a part of the covenant of promise in which the Lord's people waited for the coming one. And in their deaths they anticipated the death of him who by the Lord's preservation was taken by his parents to Egypt. For the time was not yet fulfilled. But the death of the Son would also come. By his death, by his suffering, the little ones of Bethlehem were truly the Holy Innocents. They were God's children from before the foundation of the world. In Christ they are the innocents just as we are. Not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done for us in His Son. The child escaping from the jealousy of Herod, on his way to Egypt has a long journey ahead of Him. It is a journey that will lead inexorably to the cross. For the child whose birth we just celebrated was born to die--die for us that we might have life forevermore.

### Mixed Emotions Indeed

And in the final analysis, the early church in placing this observance as well as the other special days so close to Christmas shows great wisdom. Today we still sing the songs of Christmas. We still rejoice in the birth of the child of Bethlehem. It is after all, the third day after Christmas. Indeed the season of Christmas continues through into the New Year with the commemoration of the Name of Jesus and the Feast of the Epiphany on the twelfth day. But the realization that in this life there are also crosses to bear and suffering because of the Christian faith should also be present in our minds. That indeed is the message of this day. We can view the season with mixed emotions. For in the midst of the joys of this life there are also sorrows. In times of happiness and contentment, sorrow can be just around the corner. For in the midst of earthly life that is our human condition. And there are many in the world around us who still hate the Christ child. They would rid the world of his very name. There are persecutions today that make the slaughter of the boys in Bethlehem seem like a minor thing. Millions have lost their lives for the faith in the last century alone. For the world and the prince of this world truly hate Christ and his followers. But there must forever be also the assurance of victory. The victory belongs to Christ. The victory belongs to those who are his by grace. In that hope, in that assurance, in that peace our mixed emotions can rest assured in his love.

As we sang before:

All praise for infant martyrs,  
whom Your mysterious love  
Called early from their warfare  
To share Your home above.  
O Rachel, cease your weeping;  
They rest from earthly cares!  
Lord, grant us crowns as brilliant  
And faith as sure as theirs.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.