

The Slaughter of the Innocents

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Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men (Matthew 2:16).

Herod's calculated cruelty towards the people of Bethlehem is almost without parallel in the stories of the Word. Only the Pharaoh of Egypt's orders to kill all the baby Hebrew boys can compare. The two stories are surprisingly similar: two monarchs, threatened in their power, wreak unspeakable vengeance against the weakest and most helpless of people—infant children unable to defend themselves.

The tragic story of the slaughter of Bethlehem stands in stark contrast to the rest of the narrative of the Lord's birth. In a few short verses the joy felt by the angels and the rejoicing and jubilation of the shepherds and the wise men are swept aside in the face of this unspeakable evil. Like a dark cloud blotting out the sun, Herod manages to turn the wonder of the Lord's birth into a horror story.

Tragic and gruesome as this story is, it is an important event of the Lord's birth. On the purely natural plane it is important because it gives credence to the fact that the Lord's birth would unleash powerful opposition. Herod the king opposed the Lord because he did not want his power weakened. When the wise men asked where the young child had been born, and when the full power of the ancient prophecies sunk into his brain, Herod was afraid. His only solution was to remove this threat, and since he could not identify any one particular baby, he ordered all children between the ages of zero and two killed.

On a deeper level, this action fulfilled the prophet Hosea's promise that God would call His Son "out of Egypt" (Hosea 11:1). And the prophet Jeremiah had foretold that there would be a great lamentation and weeping for the children. Thus even in the depths of this despicable action, the Lord was able to fulfil the prophecies spoken hundreds of years before His birth.

But the real reason why this awful event was allowed to take place was for a far deeper reason. Before we begin an analysis of this event, it is important for us to remind ourselves of several vitally important things. First, we need to remember that the Lord in His providence never permits any evil to happen unless He can bring some good out of it. In this case, the good is deeply hidden, because it involves aspects of the Lord's glorification. The prophecies of ancient times needed to be fulfilled, for the Lord came not to destroy the Word, but to fulfil it. The only way He could do that was by living through those things prophesied before His advent. Every detail of the Word is important and each incident has huge relevance to the development of the Lord in this world.

A second vitally important thing to remember is that the Lord created us to live in the next world. Little children who die in this world grow to maturity in heaven and become angels. Thus, while the murder of helpless children in both Exodus and Matthew is tragic from our perspective, those

so killed were not deprived of their spiritual life.

These two considerations may help us to be somewhat reconciled to Herod's actions and to look hopefully for some resulting goodness. But the actions still create problems for us until we see the story from another perspective—the internal sense of the Word. This internal sense allows us to examine the events of the Lord's birth in more abstract terms, which not only help us understand why the Lord allowed such things to happen, but how these events take place in our own lives on a daily basis.

For many centuries before the Lord's birth truth had been gradually disappearing. The ancient Jews were the only people in this world who had any true knowledge of God, and through the Word of the Old Testament, they were the only people who had any direct connection with the heavens. Yet even they had turned away from the genuine teachings of the Word, progressively covering the real truths with false interpretations until the truth itself was almost completely obliterated. In time the worship of the Lord degenerated to simply a ritual performance of sacrifices, and real worship, which is a life of charity and love, was covered up with external piety and hypocrisy.

This was the state of the only church on earth when the Lord was born. He came with great promise: the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. During the next thirty-three years He would gradually uncover the truth again, giving people an understanding of what it really means to love and worship God.

The process of exposing the truth was difficult. The chief priests, the Pharisees, and the Saducees opposed Him, attempting to turn others away from Him until finally they were able to so alienate the people that the Lord was crucified. Yet the uncovering process could not be reversed.

The first opposition to the Lord's birth and thus to the advent of truth, was from Herod. Herod opposed the Lord's birth on political grounds. He saw Himself as the king and would not admit any rival. Yet deeper in this story we see a parallel between what Herod did and what the chief priests later did: both were afraid of losing their own dominance and pre-eminence, both plotted for ways to kill the Lord, and both seized the opportunity when it arose.

Yet, the importance of Herod's actions does not lie only in their historical setting, but in our own lives. Each of us has a king within us—a series of ruling thoughts, attitudes and habits that determine our lives. The things we do on a daily basis all serve this king. If our lives are selfish, if we think only of our own well being, then our king is a Herod. In a selfish state, there is nothing more difficult for us than to have this king be exposed, challenged and corrected. And that is precisely what truth does.

Truth is born in our minds as we learn about the Lord and as His presence begins to mold our thoughts. The Lord is being born in us this very moment as we think of His presence and its affect. In every moment of His public ministry, the Lord showed Himself a healer: he cured the blind, the lame, the paralysed. He even resurrected the dead. Each time He performed one of those miracles, He showed the power of truth in us to heal and preserve. In other words, every action of His life stood in opposition to the destructive Herod-like qualities within people, then

and even today.

The appearance of truth in our minds is most vulnerable at its inception. So, too, the Lord was in greatest danger as an infant, when Herod, by long established power, was able to unleash his forces of destruction on the innocents of Bethlehem. Later on, the Lord would be able to tell Pilate that as governor he only had power because it was given to him by God. But as an infant the Lord could not speak and had no such power. The only protection from Herod was to flee to Egypt. Herod represents our selfishness, our greed, and all the false ideas we create to excuse these. Every time we make up an excuse to protect something evil, we let Herod run our lives. When we become conscious of truth, we become aware of the opposition of truth to falsity. We become uncomfortable with ourselves, and so our Herod states react—often with denial, or with a refusal to admit that certain things are true. We refuse to think about the things introduced by the truth, we justify ourselves by blaming other people, and by covering up our faults.

As we do this, in terms of the story in Matthew's Gospel, we participate in the slaughter of the innocents. It is hard to believe, but we actually enter into battle against the very truths which could deliver us from a life of evil. The only protection is to preserve the truth in our minds.

Joseph was warned in a dream to take the young Child into Egypt and protect Him there until Herod died. In the Word Egypt represents a state of learning. And in Egypt, in His early years, the Lord learned many things from the Divine Soul within Himself. Our own Egypt is also a state of learning. If we give up learning about the truth because it challenges us, or because it makes us feel uncomfortable, then our spiritual life is in grave danger.

Learning for its own sake, however, can also be dangerous. We are invited to learn as much as we can about the Lord in order to develop and perfect our faith. The more we come to understand the motivational forces within us, the more we can overcome the Herods of our lives. Truth is given to us for the sake of life, and, as the Lord said, if we obey His commandments, we shall know the truth, and the truth shall set us free.

The states of selfishness and greed, with all the attitudes and habits that go with them, wear us down. Under their control our lives will never be fulfilled, and we will never be happy. Most tragically, in these states we have a tendency to crush and put aside the very things that can help us. But with truth, we can be set free from the power of the persecution of the Herod side of our personality.

When this Christmas season ends, let us think continue to think about this story. Let us remember that the truths we know about the Lord are like that tiny infant, whom we must protect against the Herod side of our lives. Each time we say or do something we know to be wrong, we harm that little child, and each time we learn about Him and allow the Lord's presence to affect our lives, we protect the Lord in Egypt. If we continue to protect and nurture the truth by learning and doing, the Lord's presence in us will increase daily, until finally, as Herod died, so our states of evil and selfishness will also die, and we will be free of them.

Amen.