

St Andrew's, Chesterton - Morning Service on 28 December 2008
[Lynda Taylor]

(With the children)

This Sunday we come to the next chapter in the Christmas story....

Last week we heard about the different characters you can see in our crib under the altar. We heard about:

- the journey of Mary and Joseph from their home in Nazareth
- their arrival in Bethlehem where they found no place to stay
- the birth of the baby Jesus where the animals were normally kept
- the appearance of the star and the angels announcing a new king
- the visit of the shepherds to see this new baby king
- the visit of the wise men, bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh

Was this the end of the story? No - the story continues...

Now Joseph has a dream in which God tells him to prepare for new journey. King Herod is afraid of a new king in his land, even a king who is still a baby. It's no longer safe to stay in Bethlehem. And it's not safe to go home to Nazareth. Herod has sent out his soldiers to find the new baby and kill him. So Joseph sets out on a new journey to take Mary and the baby to another country - Egypt – where they will be safe from Herod's jealousy and anger. This time it's a much more dangerous journey because Herod's soldiers are after them. There is another old Christmas story about this dangerous journey – it's not a Bible story, but it still has something to teach us.

During their journey to Egypt Mary and Joseph stopped to shelter in a cave on a cold, frosty evening. Someone else was already living in the cave. It was a spider. The spider felt sorry for this little family sheltering from the dark and cold. He was especially sorry for the baby – but what could he do? He was just a spider. He decided to do what spiders do best. He began spinning a web across the cave entrance; and as the night grew colder, the web he was spinning became covered with frost and hung like a lace curtain. Later that night, Herod's soldiers arrived in the area and they were about to enter and search the cave for the baby and his family. But then the captain of the soldiers saw the spider's web sparkling with frost across the cave entrance. 'Wait a minute', he said to his men, 'no-one has been in that cave recently. Look at the web – it's not been broken or torn.' So the soldiers didn't go into the cave but went on their way, leaving Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus in peace and safety – and all because a spider had spun his web across the entrance.

And some people say that is why today we decorate our homes and our Christmas tree with this - tinsel. The glittering tinsel streamers remind us of the spider's web stretched across the cave on that dangerous journey to Egypt. Even the spider had something to give Jesus that first Christmas and it has never been forgotten. Amen.

(With the adults)

This Sunday we hear the OT reading from the prophet Jeremiah and from Matthew's gospel, and they confront us with a part of the Christmas story we find hard to stomach: the killing of the innocents. We might call it the 'dark' or 'shadow' side of the Christmas story, and it acts as a powerful corrective to our natural tendency to see the Nativity in a naïve or sentimental way. If we stop to think about it, of course, we know that a birth in a stable could not have been a particularly safe or hygienic affair; but in our carols and on our Christmas cards we tend to sanitise and repackage that and other aspects of the nativity story.

But there's not much we can do to sanitise or sentimentalise Matthew's account in which, at Herod's command, all children of 2 or under in the region are systematically slaughtered. We know this sort of thing happens. It had happened 1300 years before Jesus' birth in Egypt at the time of Moses. Nearly 2000 years after Jesus' birth, it happened in the concentration camps of the 1930s/40s. It happened in the 1970s on the Cambodian killing fields and in the 1990s during the Rwandan genocide. And it still happens in parts of our world today – in Darfur, in the Congo, in Zimbabwe; anywhere where leaders of nations, armies or tribes seek to hold onto their despotic power at any cost, innocents suffer – men, women, and children; especially children, for they are both the promise and the threat of the future.

Our gospel reading today reminds us that whenever and wherever God breaks into human life and history, there is all too often a powerful counter-force at work - a force that deliberately and continually denies the sovereignty of God and seeks to subvert his purposes. This battle of opposing forces centres around the answer to a fundamental question 'Who is the real King of this world?' It's a question that is repeated in one of the psalms set for Advent (Psalm 24). Indeed it's a question as old as humankind itself. As early as the third chapter of Genesis we see human authority tempted to set itself up in opposition to God's authority, and the same theme is repeated throughout the Old Testament. It is hardly surprising then, that at the very moment when God chooses to break into human history in a new and radical way, taking human form as a baby born in Bethlehem, God's sovereign power is openly and aggressively

challenged by those who apparently have the most to lose. The outcome is that it is not they, but the weak and the powerless and the innocent who suffer.

We should not be surprised at Herod's decisive action on learning of Jesus' birth and destiny. Those who are powerful in human terms – whether their power is political or military, financial or intellectual, or of any other sort – will be challenged and potentially threatened by God's activity which reverses human values and priorities, and instead promotes the values and priorities of God's kingdom. But wait, I hear you say, we are not like Herod, or Pol Pot, or Robert Mugabe. We could never behave like them...

Perhaps not like them. But we are all at risk of allowing our own selfish agendas and interests to dominate those of others, especially those who are weaker than ourselves; and we all too easily assume sovereignty over our own lives, shaping them in our own image, instead of inviting God to occupy the throne of our hearts and minds so that we and the world around us can be transformed according to His image. And, when this happens, it is not necessarily we who will suffer as a result, but the weak and the powerless and the innocent. In this 21st century, for example, it is the poorest and weakest in the world who will suffer most from the impact of global warming caused by those of us who live in the powerful, energy-hungry, consumerist nations of the west.

Today's focus on the Holy Innocents is just as much a wake-up call to the Christian church as the season of Advent was. We are reminded of the harsh and painful reality of God's intervention in the world. We are reminded that when God sets to work in human life and history, it provokes strong opposition from those who feel their status or future to be under threat; they respond by seeking to thwart God's sovereignty and purposes, no matter what the cost. Today we have a foreshadowing of the conflict that lies ahead with its inevitable pain and sacrifice. Over the next few months of the church's calendar, as we watch the child Jesus grow up, we shall see the battle between the forces of light and dark begin to unfold. We shall see it intensify as Jesus reaches adulthood, taking on his earthly ministry and challenging human authorities and values with those of His Father's kingdom. As Holy Week approaches, the battle-lines will be finally drawn, and on Good Friday the darkness will be overwhelming and all hope will be extinguished. And yet, as we shall see at Eastertide, that will not be the end of the story ...

Amen.