

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Advent Imperfection

Sunday Dec 16th

Matthew 2:1-18

Jeremiah 32:31-35

We have been looking at the hope and the promise of Advent, of Jesus' coming, in the past two weeks. And this is largely what you expect and want to hear as we come up to Christmas, and it is also what we need to hear, living in this imperfect world where it is easy to lose vision and hope. But today we are in more shocking territory. Today we are in the midst of a story which comes at the other side of Christmas, and which we tend to rush over, since it takes a lot of the gloss off the manger. The story of Herod. The story of violence. The story of horror and abomination.

But it is essential that we understand this story if we are to understand the adventure and mission of Jesus. And it is good that we think about it at this time of waiting and longing, and impatience for the perfect to replace the imperfect, because there is a lot of imperfection here.

King Herod, Herod the Great (there were other Herods later) ruled over Judea, under Rome, at the time leading up to the birth of Jesus. Although he had the outward trapping of the faith of his people – he rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, after it had been left in a sad state – and although he was a Jew, he ruled only under Rome and depended on the hated empire for his status. Like most people, even us, he was a man with an identity crisis. He was a Jew, one of God's chosen, and he was also known as a cruel man who used slave labour for his huge building projects and assassinated anyone who he saw as a threat – including his own wife and two of his sons. Late in his reign he began hearing rumours, rumours that the long-awaited liberator promised by Isaiah and others had been born. A pious man, a man of God, might have greeted this news with hope and joy but Herod saw it as a threat – a threat to political stability – which was never very solid, always balanced on a knife edge – and a threat to his own status as king.

Herod inquired of the scholars where such a one might be expected to be born and got the information that Bethlehem was the place to look. And so Herod did what any desperate, ruthless dictator would do. First, he tried to recruit spies – the Magi

or wise men who were passing through. They might show him who was the threat and who, therefore, to get rid of, quietly if possible. But they were warned not to trust him, so that was no good. Plan A had failed, so Herod launched plan B. He sent his henchmen to find and kill any young boy living in or near Bethlehem. But of course this failed in its object too as the right boy had already been removed from the area.

And so we read of the slaughter of the innocent. Plan B failed in its object but there was what some might call collateral damage. Scholars argue that this massacre may not have taken place as it is not recorded elsewhere. But they also say that since Bethlehem was small, it might not have been so large a massacre as to merit recording, in these uncertain times. We know that dictators have a way of keeping their atrocities secret. Whatever the death-count in Bethlehem, we know that Herod was the kind of man who would not balk at such a course of action: remember he had already had two of his own sons killed.

The deeper truth of this story, deeper than the horrific details, is that Herod has now become a ruler after the model of the ancient Pharaoh who ordered that all Hebrew boy babies be killed. A descendant of the Hebrew slaves is behaving like the slave-master. And so the story of Herod tells us again the important lesson that the world cannot be divided between the good guys – us – and the bad guys – them. People who are us will behave like them given the power and the provocation. All people face the same question: how will we manage power and how will we deal with violence? Herod modelled one way: the way of using violence as a tool to gain or maintain power.

The baby who was not killed will model another way. His tool will be service, not violence. His goal will not be gaining and maintaining power, but using power to heal and empower others. He will reveal a vision of God that is reflected more in the vulnerability of children than in the violence of men, more in the caring of mothers than in the cruelty of kings. And Advent and Christmas means that we are given a choice of which way to follow – the way of Herod or the way of Christ.

And that is all well and good if it just referred to the past and the way that things were back in the bad old days. If we could shake our heads over the Herod story and be comforted that that was then and this is now. But of course the bad old days are still with us: this is why our Advent each year is full of longing, longing for a better world, for a more perfect humanity: longing for Jesus and the kingdom of God.

But here is the thing: there are wars going on in the world right now. Wars waged by older men, men with power or who desire power, and who send out to fight those who are the age of their children or grandchildren. It was ever thus. In war most of the casualties will be between eighteen and twenty-two years old – in some places much younger – and the old, sad music of the ancient story of Herod and the

slaughter of the children is replayed every day. And the tears of the mothers still fall.

Whether it is in the massacre of the innocents in the Christmas story or in the killing of the young in times of war, the sacrifice of children for the well-being and security of adults has a long history among human beings. This is where our second, maybe slightly obscure reading comes in. In the ancient Middle East there was a religion dedicated to an idol named Molech. Devotees of this faith would sacrifice infants to Molech every year, to appease their god's wrath and earn favour. One of the things that the people of Israel discover over and over again, in the pages of the Old Testament, is that the true God doesn't require this: in fact God doesn't require appeasement at all. Abraham is prevented from sacrificing his son and learns that God does not require this of him. And over and over we have verses like the ones we read today: They built up the high places of Baal in the valley of the sons of Hinom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination..." (Jeremiah 32:35)

Over and over God is shown to his people to be the example of true, loving mature parenthood, self-giving for the sake of his children, not requiring that children be sacrificed to his selfish interests.

This is why we should never stop grappling with what we believe about God. Does God promote or demand violence? If you read some of the Old Testament stories in isolation from the good news of Jesus then it can almost seem that God does. Before Jesus we keep seeing the violent, insecure understanding of God and power that was held by surrounding peoples creeping into the stories and the telling and interpreting of the stories of God's people: until someone again reminds them that the true God is not like that. What we believe about God matters. Is God best reflected in the image of powerful old men who send the young and vulnerable to die on their behalf? Or is he seen in the image of a helpless baby, identifying with the victims, full of fragile but limitless promise?

We do not live in an ideal world. Advent acknowledges this, as we hear Jesus' injunction to keep awake for his return. Advent acknowledges this as we look again at prophecies and hopes that we still long to see fulfilled. Jesus has truly come and has truly shown us who God is – fully and completely shown us who God is, so that all other ideas, even if found in our holy scriptures, must fall away. Jesus has truly come, but each year in Advent we acknowledge in our longing that the dream for which he gave his all has not yet fully come true. As long as elites plot violence, as long as children pay the price, as long as mothers weep, we cannot be satisfied.

To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to side with the vulnerable against the powerful. Christmas is for the children, they say, and on one level it is true. It is

true that Jesus came to side with vulnerable children against those who see them as expendable. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to refuse to bow to Herods, to any power but one, and to reserve our loyalty for a better, a true King and a better, a true kingdom.

So today looking at our three candles, let us think of them as candles of prayer, such as you find in some churches. Flames that burn to hold our prayers before God: the first as a prayer for the children who suffer in our world because of greedy, power-hungry elites (and some of those live very close to home); the second as a prayer for grieving mothers who weep for lost sons and daughters, however they came to be taken from them; and the third as a prayer for all people everywhere to hear the weeping and repent. In this Advent season we dare to believe that God sees injustice, and that God feels pain, and comes near to bring comfort. And if we believe that, then of course we too must join God and draw near.

If the ugliness of the story of Herod and of mass murder and of violence against innocence has no place in the beautiful Christmas story of God's love, then it has no place in the world either. And it is the task of those who live in the adventure of Jesus to work with God to change the world, siding with the vulnerable and living with love in our hearts