As you will have gathered from our readings, today the church remembers the Holy Innocents, those children who were murdered by Herod in a vain attempt by him to rid the world of the infant Jesus. I told a Roman Catholic friend of mine that I was going to preach about the Holy innocents. He told me that I would have an uphill struggle as he felt that I was neither holy nor innocent...an assessment with which I have to agree and which I swiftly reflected back to him. But surely, I hear you say, it’s still Christmas. Yet today’s readings speak of lamentation and bitter weeping, of Rachel weeping for her children who are no more; she refuses to be comforted.

Well you may be thinking, I’m glad I got up this morning to come to church. The turkey carcass looked a bit bedraggled in the fridge, even the remains of the nut roast looks a bit sad, the dustbin is full of rubbish and I wanted to get out for a bit, get some fresh air and be reminded about the real meaning of Christmas. I was hoping for a gentle Christmas message, perhaps a carol or two and the promise that Christmas might go on for ever; and now the Priest is in the pulpit preaching lamentation and bitter weeping. It was much more cheerful at midnight mass.

Let’s just for a moment stand back from this paradox. It has always struck me powerfully, that immediately after the long waiting of Advent, the endless happy songs of Christmas and the joy of Christmas Day, the church’s calendar immediately takes us through a number of difficult remembrances. Boxing Day is the Feast of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, stoned to death for his faith, yesterday we remembered St John the Evangelist who was asked by the dying Jesus, from the cross, to take care of Mary. And today we keep Holy Innocents.

There has been much scholarly discussion about whether Herod ordered this slaughter or not and if he did, then in a village the size of Bethlehem there would only have been a few infants to put to death and not the thousands of popular belief. It is just possible that Herod is entirely innocent of this particular sin. However the story, like many Christian stories, serves as an archetype which tells us a truth about the way human beings are. For it is quite clearly true that the innocents have been regularly slaughtered throughout history and that this continues today. One need only look to the kidnapping of young girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, or the 304 children and adults killed as a result of carelessness in the South Korean ferry accident earlier this year, or of the depressed mother who jumped off the Clifton suspension bridge in Bristol clutching her infant to her, both innocent in different ways. And in just the last few days the shocking events in Sydney and in Peshawar. And today we hold in our hearts all those affected by the loss yesterday of the AirAsia plane from Indonesia and the unfolding events on the Greek ferry in the Mediterranean today. Without stretching the definition of Holy Innocents too much, we might also think of all civilians killed as a result of war, euphemistically called non-combatant casualties. In the war between Israel and Palestine this summer, 69% of the 2000 people killed were civilians and of those almost 500 were children.

The UN reports that 2014 is likely to be the worst ever for child deaths in armed conflict. In a world where individuals and groups become more and more desperate to wound through more and more extreme expressions of violence, children appear to become increasingly the soft targets of war.
We do, of course, find something particularly outrageous about the death and suffering of children. As we reflect today on all those who die innocently and particularly children, whether through war, famine, accident or disease; in the tragedy of all that, what is often unleashed is an outpouring of human compassion. So when Band Aid made their first appeal 30 years ago it was suffering children who seemed to inspire the world to give. In the news reports from Michael Buerk in Ethiopia, it was images of children which seemed to be able to touch our hearts more deeply than could have been imagined.

In these days after Christmas we do perhaps need to reflect on the truth that Jesus came not just to save the children but to save the whole world. We are reminded that the Christ child came as a gift from God, a gift with a purpose.

And yet faced with such anguish, bloodshed and horror we often feel helpless and impotent, we watch the images on our screens and inwardly groan. We feel outrage and compassion even boredom, we may feel moved to make a donation but we are at a loss about what to do beyond that. When the tinsel has been stripped out and the tree has dropped its needles, what hope can we find in the light of such overwhelmingly bad things.

The prophet Jeremiah intimates that there is hope for our future and Matthew sees that hope in the fulfillment of the prophecy with the birth of Jesus.

The hope is that from this tiny, seemingly insignificant baby, hounded out, even from his crib, and becoming the first refugee of Christendom; even in this bleak scenario an event of cosmic consequence is being born. This child, who from even before his birth, was the target of the evil which is found in every human heart...breaks through all that...and ultimately offers his heart to help us to love and heal the world. A great idea but we still feel helpless and impotent.

Yet if we really believe that this small infant brought the possibility of hope and change in an overwhelmingly difficult world then we need to find that hope and promise in ourselves. So, for example, in this coming election year of 2015, we might find ourselves being less reluctant to speak out to candidates and MPs about the vilification of exiles and refugees, we might feel ourselves a little more able to challenge the savage cuts to welfare and health spending, we might find ourselves being a little more able to gently and firmly challenge the presumptions of some of those we meet in our daily lives and in our families and friends where every challenge which our society faces seems to be laid at the door of the exile or outcast or the malingerer. And when that little corner of racism emerges in the room around us or possibly even in ourselves, we might want to think back to the infant Jesus, driven from his very crib into a foreign country because of the power of evil, we may remember that scripture which says: God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

The coming of the infant Jesus teaches us that small things make big differences but there will always, as in the case of Jesus himself be a cost...

Jesus gave his life...all he asks of you is that you give your heart.