

Sunday 30 December 2007: The Holy Innocents

Loving King Herod

Readings: Isaiah 63. 7-9; Matthew 2. 13-end

One of my quarrels with the Church's calendar, and I have several, is that the massacre of the Holy Innocents happens before the Feast of the Epiphany. The killing of the Bethlehem babies is an integral part of the story of the three kings, and looking at the ending of the story before its beginning seems very much the wrong way round. And in any event I'm not at all convinced that thinking about the deaths of babies is what we want to be doing about in the aftermath of Christmas.

The story of the three kings is in fact the story of five kings. The first is the baby Jesus, born King of the Jews; the second, third and fourth are the three travellers from the east who bring along their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; and the fifth is bad King Herod who orders the killing of the babies. And it really is an appalling story. I've seen it dramatised a number of times in grown-up nativity plays, and on each occasion I've been absolutely terrified, but one of the things I always admire in the Gospels is the way that the most dramatic events are always told in the very simplest language, and this has the effect of greatly enhancing the drama and in no way diminishing it: "Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked by the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and he sent forth and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men".

But why? Why did bad King Herod do this terrible thing? The reason implicit in St Matthew's account is that he wanted to hang onto his position of kingship. HE was the King of the Jews, and the intelligence he received from the three wise men was that somebody else, recently born in Bethlehem, was laying claim to his title, so he decided that the best way of removing the threat was to send in his troops to kill all Bethlehem's babies. But I suspect that there's more to it than this. All through the messy business of the lives we have to lead there is always a tendency for things to go wrong, and there is a strong human temptation to pin the blame for what goes wrong onto somebody else, since that way we absolve ourselves from having to take responsibility for our own actions. And even when the things that go wrong are not our own fault, it's always handy to have somebody else on whom the blame can be pinned, both because it provides us with a convenient explanation, and also because it saves us from having to acknowledge that the blind workings of the universe are sometimes capable of being malign. Governing his kingdom in uneasy subjugation to the Romans must have been very difficult for King Herod, and a credible explanation is that he ordered the massacre in order to demonstrate that he was still in control.

This process of blaming happens at an individual level, and at group level, and at the level of whole societies, and it is always dangerous because it never solves the problem, and because it almost inevitably escalates into a vicious spiral of blame and counter-blame which has the effect of entrenching positions on both sides of the argument, and thus making rapprochement and reconciliation that much harder to achieve. There are two ways of ending this vicious spiral that I know about, and one of them is to set up a scapegoat. I can remember very vividly a series of incidents that happened in my office when I was still at work. Two senior managers had a row with each other, and one blamed the other and the other blamed the one, and this put us underlings in the position of having to choose whose side we were on, and very soon the antagonism started to put the whole enterprise seriously at risk. So what the two of them did, and they were both very intelligent and competent people, was to agree between

themselves that everything that had happened wasn't the fault of either of them, but was the fault of somebody completely different. There was another senior manager who had been seconded in from another department, and he was accused of being the cause of it all and was summarily sent back. Everything got back to what passed for normal and, though most of us were silently aware of what had really happened, we chose to go along with it because a return to normality was what we all wanted. One person did in fact complain, but she was officially censured even though her version of the events was entirely accurate.

On a larger scale, scapegoats can be created by the media, by Governments, and even by the Church, and I'm sure that we can all think of examples in each of these categories. The Church ones are the most dangerous, because when the Church chooses to identify a scapegoat group, it first defines them as different, and then excludes them, and then persecutes them, and it sacralises this exclusion and persecution by putting it about that the rejection is the will of God, and this makes the scapegoating process that much harder to reverse. It has happened in the past to members of other denominations, who have been branded as heretics, and to members of other faiths, who have been branded as unbelievers, and it's happened to various individuals at the fringes of society who have been branded as witches or necromancers or whatever. And quite often these excluded groups start assuming the characteristics that are being projected onto them, and start behaving in ways that reinforce the projection. And, of course, in Western history the longest running scapegoat group have been the Jews. But the events of the holocaust have made it difficult for Jews to be scapegoated any longer, and this has made it necessary to create new scapegoats. I can remember several years back, in the aftermath of Pope John Paul II's reconciliation with Judaism, reading about a Roman Catholic Bishop who arranged his own service of reconciliation, which was attended by representatives of his own local Jewish community, and in the sermon that he preached at that very service he castigated the gay community and said that they should all be banished to a new ghetto because of the danger to society which they represented.

But there is another way of ending the vicious spiral of blame and counter-blame, which is to be on the side of the victim, and the people who first appreciated this were, ironically, the Jews. Compare two very similar, but fundamentally different, foundation myths, both of them about two rival brothers and one killing the other. In the Roman religion Romulus killed Remus, and Romulus the victor started being worshipped as the founder of Rome. But in the Jewish religion Cain killed Abel, but God declared himself to be on the side of Abel, and he marked out Cain as a murderer. The Old Testament is full examples of God favouring the victim; think of Job, and Ruth, and Jonah, and most obviously the Exile passages in Isaiah like the one we have just heard. But being on the side of the victim is never easy, and often it carries a very high price tag. Whistleblowers, like the lady I mentioned earlier, are very often not believed, and very often they end up by being victimised themselves because, both as individuals and as members of our communities, we have such a strong vested interest in the boat not being rocked, and in the truth not being told. A willingness to identify with the victim, and indeed a willingness to be a victim, implies shifting to a different sort of value system, a value system which requires relinquishing a dependence on the status quo, and a commitment to exposing what it is that's really going on. But, even insofar as we are able to DO this, even insofar as we are able to summon up the courage to do it, we lay ourselves open to a new and even more insidious temptation, which is to scapegoat our persecutors, to say to ourselves "I'm the good guy, I'm the courageous one who's got it right, and the people who are persecuting me have got it wrong and are thoroughly bad", and the consequence is that the vicious spiral of blame and counter-blame keeps on turning.

An additional dimension is needed which is that, as well as being on the side of the victim, it is also necessary to be on the side of the persecutors. One of Jesus's crucial commands was that we should love our enemies, because loving only our friends doesn't do us very much good. When he said this he was implying a great deal more than merely encouraging us just to be nice; solidarity with our friends has the effect of locking us into the entrenched positions we already occupy, and which are likely to include denigrating the other guys, whereas solidarity with our enemies is the only way in which we can hope to gain any sort of understanding of the bigger picture within which differing perspectives and attitudes can be reconciled. Taking on board perspectives and attitudes which are different from the ones we are already locked into is inevitably difficult, and often very painful, but it's a necessary step in the direction of entering into the Kingdom of Heaven. I can remember very clearly an appalling response offered by some Christians during the early years of HIV/AIDS, which invited people to rejoice in the advent of HIV and AIDS because they represented God's judgement on the victims for the lifestyles in which they had indulged. I think that yes, God's judgement does enter into the HIV/AIDS predicament, but in exactly the opposite way from the way that that invitation implies. Insofar as God invites us to identify with life's victims, what gets revealed to us is all the prejudices we have previously been locked into against those victims, and the more strongly those prejudices have been entrenched the harder it will be for us to ditch them, and it will be harder still if we have sacralised those prejudices and kidded ourselves that they represent the will of God.

All this has been an elaborate preparation for looking at the crucifixion. The story of the Holy Innocents is an obvious prefiguration of the crucifixion since both are about the killing of innocent victims; and the question which the three kings ask of King Herod is "Where is he who is born King of the Jews?", and in St Matthew's Gospel the inscription over the cross on which Jesus was crucified was "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews". Throughout the Gospel story Jesus identifies himself with society's victims, and he himself accepts the role of victim as a means of bringing the vicious spiral of blame and counter-blame to a glorious end. What makes this ending of the spiral work is that, at the same time as accepting the role of victim, he forgives the people and the processes which create victims. "Love those who persecute you", and "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". The message of the crucifixion is that God loves Pilate, and Caiaphas, and the soldiers who hammer in the nails, and everybody whom we simplistically label as the bad guys. Jesus loves all of them, and we must love them too. In the story of the Holy Innocents identifying with the victims, with the massacred Bethlehem babies, is not at all difficult, but we also need to avoid the pitfall of scapegoating the perpetrator. So the difficult message for this Sunday after Christmas, and it's one which is at odds with every single one of the Epiphany carols, is that we should learn to love and forgive King Herod.