

RECTOR'S PINT

On the days immediately following Christmas Day there are three further holy days; St Stephen on the 26th, St John on the 27th and on the 28th, the Commemoration of the Slaughtered Innocents. This is a deeply unpleasant story. Following the birth of Jesus, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee, with Mary and the baby, to Egypt. Herod had heard of Jesus' birth, thanks to the very 'unwise' men who had told him of the birth of a new king, and he planned to hunt Jesus down and kill him. To do this, he ordered that all the male children in and around Bethlehem, who were two years old or under, should be killed. The story is found in the second chapter of Matthew's gospel.

Bethlehem was not a large town; we would think of it as a village, and was probably home to no more than twenty or thirty babies and infants. The incident is not recorded anywhere else, but in a land where brutality was widespread, the murder of twenty or so children in an unimportant town would scarcely have caused a stir. It is no less terrible for that, and we do know from independent accounts that this is precisely the sort of thing Herod would have done. There is a long list of atrocities associated with him, including the killing of his wife and three sons.

We are all horribly aware of another terrible 'slaughter of innocents', with the shocking and brutal atrocity committed by Hamas in Israel two months ago, and the consequences which followed in Gaza, when so many children were caught up in the conflict. I believe that we should grieve for the suffering and deaths of all these innocents, without prejudice. I am not going to try to unravel a horribly complex situation here. The truth is, the fallout has been terrible. Innocents have been slaughtered.

The Biblical story of the slaughter of the innocents, hidden away at the back of our Christmas celebrations, is a reminder that Jesus, whom Christians call 'Immanuel, God with us,' was born into a world in which acts of brutality were commonplace.

In the carol, 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,' are these words: *Yet, with the woes of sin and strife, the world has suffered long; Beneath the angels' strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong; And man, at war with man hears not the love-song which they bring. Oh, hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the Angels sing.* The story of the slaughtered innocents is a reality check amidst the festive sentiment and excess, but year by year we can still declare this love song, this message of Immanuel. In these uncertain and troubled times, I hope that all those of you who read 'The Pint' will know the blessing of the Christ child, 'God with us' this Christmas.

Simon