

Feast of the Holy Innocents

Matthew's community experienced the awful reality of persecution, including the killing of innocent children because they were members of a Christian family. It is this experience of people losing their lives because of their association with Jesus that underlies today's Gospel narrative.

Racial and religious persecution has a long and terrible history. Today's gospel refers back to the time of Jeremiah when the Babylonian army rounded up thousands of Jews at Ramah north of Jerusalem where they began their forced march into exile in Babylon. Many, including little children, would have died on the way. Rachel, the wife of Jacob, symbolises every mother weeping for her children. In his composition, Matthew is also drawing on the literature of the Book of Exodus which describes the murder of Hebrew children by the Pharaoh of Egypt.

The current tribal genocide in Rwanda and Burundi is a shocking reminder of what insecurity, fear, rage, and lust for revenge can bring people to do, even to the slaughter of children. We are even more horrified by the organised and cold-blooded killing of children during the holocaust. Crimes such as these astonish, frighten and horrify us for they show us what human beings are capable of when driven by rage or ideology or even by a sick religious fanaticism. The voice of the blood of these innocents, like the voice of Able, is crying out to God from the ground (Genesis 4:10).

There are lesser crimes than the awful ones just mentioned. Children are caught up as innocent victims wherever there is war or mob violence and wherever powerful economic forces drive communities to desperation and starvation. In these circumstances, people are not deliberately setting out to slaughter children, but this is one result of our selfish and unjust policies or actions. We all need conversion and repentance here. We are still benefiting from the crimes of those who murdered the original inhabitants of our land, and their children are still suffering the consequences. Apathy fed by ignorance can no longer excuse us for working for justice. On a world scale, once we realise that our silent collusion with unjust trading policies and with the consumerist greed of the so-called First world countries includes among its direct effects the death of innocent children, we might be shocked into working for change there as well.

We think, too, of the abortions that are taken for granted by a large number of people in our society. It is obvious that we are speaking here of terminating life, and what kind of life are we terminating if not the early stages of life which is human? The procuring of an abortion would rarely involve the deliberate intention of killing a human being. Because human life in its beginnings is not seen and because no emotional bonding has yet taken place, people can be persuaded by pseudo-arguments that the foetus is something less than human, and abortion can be seen as an economic measure, or as a way of avoiding the inconvenience of parenthood or of avoiding shame.

Some have an abortion because they are desperate: desperately alone, unloved, unsupported, on the edge of despair and they cannot see how they can cope with responsibilities that are already overwhelming them. Situations such as I have described are unfortunately very common. If we are going to oppose abortion, as we should, then we must also undertake the obligation to provide all the material, psychological and spiritual support at our disposal to those who feel driven to such desperate measures.

In all the above instances, it is important that we acknowledge the reality of what is happening, but it is never our right to apportion blame. No one except those who have experienced it can know the blindness of rage that can overwhelm those who are fighting for their lives in a situation of racial conflict, or the desperation of a pregnancy which drives people to

despair. There but for the grace of God go any of us. Our hearts should be filled with compassion for those responsible for such actions.

The key lesson of today's feast is a lesson in respect for the sacredness of life - of any and every life. This is why the Church places the feast here, so close to Christmas. We look into the crib and there we see God embracing our human condition in all its vulnerability and weakness, yet in all its simple attraction and humility. God, the Creator of all, the source of all life and the one to whom every heart is drawn in love, chose to embrace the human condition in exactly the way we all embrace it - as an infant, emerging from the womb of our mother, crying for nourishment for his body and for his soul, opening his arms, hoping to be embraced.

The most hardened heart can melt before the simple acceptance of love given by a new-born baby. A baby is totally needy, but it already has the potential to become a unique, creative, free and wonderfully loving human being. Life-experiences, good and bad, will direct its life-force. Life-experiences will curb its life-force. Life-experiences will wound its life-force. But life-experiences do not create the life force. This comes uniquely for every person conceived into this world from the mysterious and loving creative power of God. Nothing can destroy the God-given grace which every child is, and, as Jesus showed us, nothing can separate any of us from the love of God shown us in the Heart of Jesus.

We are reminded today that the child is still there in the adult person. Whatever life has done to any of us and whatever choices, good and bad, that we and others have made, we must never lose sight of the sacredness of our own heart and life and the sacredness of the life of another. As John says: "If we say we love God whom we do not see and fail to love people whom we do see, we are liars". We might apply this also to our present subject. If we say we are concerned for the life of those we do not see but fail to respect the lives of those we do see then we are liars.

It is inevitable as we struggle to find ourselves and to grow in maturity that we will use and abuse others, however unwittingly. Brothers and sisters can treat each other very poorly and insensitively as they attempt to find out who they are. Parents use each other and use their children to vent their frustrations and as they experiment with life and discover themselves. Teenagers take out their frustrations often quite unjustly on those who love them most. This is the way we are, we imperfect human beings. What is asked of us is that as we come to realise the ways in which we are using and hurting others, we acknowledge what we are doing, ask forgiveness and change to a more mature way of relating.

Without forgiveness we will never survive. We are called today to accept God's forgiveness for the harm we have done to ourselves and to others. We read in Psalm 102:

"It is God who forgives all your guilt, who heals every one of your ills;
who redeems your life from the grave, who crowns you with love and compassion ...
God does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults"(102:3-4,10)

Let us pray for the grace to see ourselves and others, and especially children who are so vulnerable, as unique and sacred expressions of God's own being. Children need our protection and guidance, but these are given well only by those who are very conscious of the sacredness of the life unfolding before them. If we treat others always with the sacred respect which God has for them, we will be strengthened against any temptation to cause harm to any child, born or unborn, and we will be committed to provide the physical and emotional and spiritual environment which will lessen the temptation of others to behave violently towards them.