

Holy Innocents Day

As you will see from *Common Worship*, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Innocents on 28th December. So you may well wonder why it's the subject of this year's article for January. The answer is that it's integral to the narrative of the Visit of the Magi, which we commemorate on 6 January as the Feast of the Epiphany, the premier feast-day of this month. Before I go any further, let me say that I have always thought it odd that we commemorate the massacre of the Holy Innocents before we focus on the Visit of the Magi!

It's only Matthew who tells us about the Magi; and according to his narrative, it is only after the wise men have visited the Christ-child and have gone home by another route, without going back to report the child's whereabouts to Herod, that Herod orders the killing of all the male babies under two in the region of Bethlehem. So you see why I wonder about Holy Innocents' Day being on 28th December. In fact, when the feast-day was first recorded in the Western Church, in a manuscript called the Leonine Sacramentary, which dates from about 485, it was — more logically I think — connected with the Feast of the Epiphany. But liturgical calendars from Anglo-Saxon England, which follow continental models, show that it was already firmly established as 28 December by the very early eighth century. The Holy Innocents were generally regarded as the first martyrs for the faith, although, of course, they were unknowing and not Christian.

Whether the story is actually historical is, of course, a matter for debate, as indeed is much of the colourful detail of the Nativity stories. Herod was certainly ruthless enough to resort to murder to protect his precarious position as a non-Jewish puppet king under the Romans, and if he were indeed told by the Wise Men that they were seeking a child who would be the Governor of Israel (Matthew 2: 6), one could well understand his reaction. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing towards the end of the first century, tells us that Herod murdered three of his own sons, his mother-in-law and his second wife. But there is a twist in our tale: the information said to be given by the Magi to Herod in verse 6 is taken from an Old Testament prophecy, the need for the Holy Family to flee to Egypt for a while to escape Herod, and the grief which followed the massacre are all presented by Matthew as fulfilments of Old Testament prophecies, and so can be seen as part of a construct, after the event, to give expression, though narrative, to what people had subsequently come to understand about the nature of Jesus and his significance for the Jews (for whom, primarily, Matthew's gospel was written). In this scenario, Herod was a good peg on which to hang the story, given his well-known and extreme ruthlessness.

It is the cruelty and the suffering of the women which have always fired the imagination of artists, even to the present day, although most strikingly in the gruesome depictions from the Middle Ages. It was also the subject of some of the more vivid medieval mystery plays. According to these and other written traditions, large numbers of children were killed. But even if we believe that the event occurred as described, the number is more likely to have been somewhere between six and twenty — horrific though that is.

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