



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday December 28, 2014
The Feast of the Holy Innocents

*Lord, make me to know my end and the measure of my days, what it is,
that I may know how frail I am. ps.39:4*

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

The frailty of these words, from the fourth verse of the thirty-ninth psalm, certainly echo down the passages of today's Gospel according to Matthew. Not, however, in the way we might at first think.

By the time I was six or seven, I had been exposed to many truths by my father. His love of simile, turn of phrase, and metaphor was, to be quite honest, overwhelming, if not completely tiring.

For instance, at that ripe old age I knew: “the road to hell is paved with good intention”, “It doesn't matter whether you came to do it, or went to do it, it's all the same in the end”, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”, “better safe, than sorry”, “time heals all wounds”, not to mention a multitude of others that would rival Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, not to mention dear Mr. Franklin. I thank God he has let that family scourge pass my lips!

As I was saying, “the foot of the cradle lies in the grave”. So why does this happen to these infants? Why did the architects of the lectionary crowd the house of Christmas joy with so much sorrow and death; parents refusing comfort because their children were (in their eyes) expunged?

First, the fourth verse of psalm thirty-nine shows clearly our impatience with God's plans and timetables. Our lives are a pilgrimage, from first to last, God

makes no promises about the nature, manner, or in our small minds the quality or quantity of that journey.

Are we to think that that the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents is of less worth in the eyes of the Almighty because of the brevity of their lives? Worth less than Stephen's or Andrew or any other martyr who by benefit of age knew the fullness of his act? Or the fact that neither they nor their parents had the vaguest idea of a boy king in the area or His importance? Heaven Forfend! If this were true we would all be in serious trouble! For me, it is somewhat startling to realize that when Mozart was my age he had been dead for twenty years! *I'm doomed.* Besides, we know this to not be true by Christ's own words and in Matthew's own hand that this is not the case from Matthew 20:1 and the parable of the householder and his vineyard. Not to mention that it would be somewhat forward of us to do God's job for Him and judge the quality of a martyr or for that matter any human life.

So why innocent? We know from the fifty-first psalm, verse five, “Behold I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Brought into this breathing world on the back of Adam's original sin. They were holy innocents by grace, not by nature. Engrafted into the covenant God made with Abraham when they were circumcised, they were placed in a life of faith to await the redemption of Messiah. So as

Aurelius Prudentius, a hymnist of note in the mid fourth and early fifth century wrote; they left this pilgrimage:

Sweet flowerets of the martyr band
Plucked by the tyrants ruthless hand
Upon the threshold of the morn
Like rosebuds by a tempest torn

Infants made Holy Innocents by the true Holy Innocent. His conception was holy, His life without sin. His heart never deviated from His Father's law. He came among us, and then on the cross paid a debt that we owe. He secured for them and for us perfect redemption for all men for all time through His body and blood.

So why there? Why in this manner? The Bethlehem of two thousand years ago was a tough place. First, we have a society run by religious zealots that would give most zealots a bad name. Second, we have an occupying force that is at odds with the zealots and vice versa, all traveling 'round in Earth's diurnal course, struggling for power and authority. They can't live with each other or without each other. Add to this a couple of hundred false messiahs, con men, thieves, and good old fashioned murderers. In other words we would recognize it immediately. On top of all this we have an aging, diseased, paranoid megalomaniac of a king who is juggling all this, trying to stay in power, all under Rome's watchful eye. Finally, add to that the fact that shepherds are coming out of the hills and into town and it's not market day, and there are elegant and obviously wealthy strangers in town with rumors of a king.

Now Herod was not a nice guy. His treachery is the stuff of legend, so the slaughter of twenty or thirty infant boys would mean nothing to him. Now we know that the infants were males for a couple of reasons. First, the Greek text uses the word "pais" for the infants, which is male specific. Also, the wise men were seeking a king, again gender specific. And, Herod would have been very aware of Roman oversight, so economy and ease would be the name of the game. He murdered three sons, a wife, her sons, her brother and a host of others. Augustus said "It is better to be Herod's swine than his son."

Without the benefit of two thousand years of hindsight, I would be willing to bet that most of us

would view this operation with a jaundiced eye and sure of its failure.

With two thousand years of hindsight into God's greatest gift of love how can we expect anything but success?

How many times in our lives has the miraculous been foreshadowed by tragedy? We live in an age when everyone of us must know, or know of, someone alive today because of an organ donated by the death of the donor. How many of us know someone, or of someone, who because of an illness requiring a specific donor finds family as yet unknown? How many know someone who because of illness or close death is reconciled with family or friends? How many know someone who because of misfortune or tragedy meets someone completely unexpected and outside their circle who meet and fall in love and grow Christ's Holy Bride? What about Saul the christian hunter (who watched the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen) converted to Apostle Paul? Not to mention Christ giving Himself over to horrid ignominy and death to purchase victory over the grave, for us, for all time!

All of these events borne of tragedy and yet so full of love and joy for us and for God.

God's joy is in the fact that we kept the faith as Mary and Joseph did in the face of adversity and did the only thing required for His redemption: we accepted it!

The God who so loves us, the God of the unexpected, who led His Chosen People out of Egypt to safety and freedom and led the Messiah into Egypt for His safety and our freedom from sin and death does not make mistakes. He wants us to join the Holy Innocents.

So, I hope that in this festival of peace and joy we will all promise ourselves this:

When seemingly insurmountable odds or out right tragedy strike, and they will, Pray. The God of miracles and joy will answer. And if we feel that God might let us down, let's do this: we will prepare to do what we did the last time He let us down.

Which is nothing but accept His Love, and remember, "it is always darkest before the dawn".

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

