SERMON: St Leonard's December 28th

Holy Innocents

Jer. 31:15-20

Ps. 124

1 Jn.1:5-2:2

Mt.2: 13-18

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. **Amen**

Herod was a great king. We know that because he told us so. Herod liked to build. He built fortified palaces that proclaimed his majesty: the Tower of David in Jerusalem; the Kypros near Jericho; the Herodion, near Bethlehem; and (most famously) Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea. He turned a waterless coast into a great port city at Caesarea Maritima. There his engineers used hydraulic concrete to thrust two mighty piers out into the water, turning the open beach into a sheltered harbour. He ordered the construction of many of its great public buildings and secured the city's water supply with Roman-style aqueducts. He adorned and fortified Jerusalem, with its great Antonia Fortress, and the elegant portico surrounding the Pool of Siloam. Most grandly, he proclaimed his piety by undertaking a massive renovation of the Temple. The vast terrace that he constructed for it still exists, and its retaining wall is the most substantial structure that survives of the ancient Temple – the so-called Western or "Wailing" Wall.

This policy of continual construction ensured a high level of economic activity and therefore employment. It was principally paid for by Herod's subjects through a tough tax regime, stringently enforced. It was not just the Romans who gave the tax farmers of Judaea a bad name.

You may have noticed that these structures all attract adjectives like "vast, grand, majestic, grandiose". They were intended to. Herod sought to project an image of power and continuity through their construction. This was common enough in antiquity. Powerful rulers crafted both their image and their legacy through public building projects. But I wonder, and without a trace of irony, if Herod is most remembered for these buildings or for the event that was recorded in our gospel reading today, the "massacre of the innocents"?

I have no doubt that Herod could find a perfectly reasonable rationale for his policy of exterminating the little children of Bethlehem. It might look like state terrorism, but it was a proper act, for reasons of ensuring political stability to eliminate even potential threats to the regime. Herod had come to power through civil war and intrigue. Such reasoning might seem to us cynical and deeply self-interested, and properly so, but it might also be seen both at the time, and in its historical context, as understandable, if not justifiable.

But isn't that just the awful truth about political violence. It can always find a rhetoric. It can always find an excuse. It can always find the entirely reasonable context for the entirely hideous act. For us in the Australia of December 2025, this has a very contemporary flavour. Two weeks ago, we learned with increasing horror, as the news trickled in, of the massacre at Bondi Beach. Almost immediately after the gunfire stopped, the attempts began to narrate this event, to find a context for it, to find causes and reasons and people to blame.

And, perhaps even worse, is the endeavour to relativize the event by saying that it's not as bad as what the Israelis are doing in Gaza. As an objective statement, that is true enough. Israel's modern Herod and the armies of the state have conducted a campaign that has, with reason, been labelled genocidal. The innocents of Bethlehem are recalled in the innocents of Rafa and Khan Younis and Gaza City. In the calculus of horror, far

more people mourn far more people killed and injured in Gaza than ever happened at Bondi. But as a subjective statement, intending to draw an immoral equivalence, it is dangerously glib. One parent mourning a murdered child is enough to make any comparison fall away.

I must confess to a certain self-interest here. For five years, I lived in a flat about 150 metres from the massacre site. At the time, I taught at an Anglican school in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney with a 17% Jewish enrolment. That led me to visit Israel twice in the late eighties to sit at the feet of some of the most accomplished scholars in the history of the Holocaust and Antisemitism. I developed teaching units focusing on the history and experience of these which I implemented at both schools and universities. For a number of years, I was heavily involved in the NSW Council of Christians and Jews. I had, and have, many friends in the Sydney Jewish community, some of whom were on the beach that night. So, yes, this is all personal to me, but it shouldn't have to be. We are all diminished by it.

Let us think, for a moment, of the theology of this great evil and not the politics. Where is God in all of this? The men pointing the guns thought that God was with them; their victims thought that God was with them. The truth of the gospel, and it's a hard truth because we would like God to take sides, is that God was with the perpetrators **and** the victims. God was beside the perpetrators in their pain and alienation: the still, small voice that whispered to them "you don't have to do this; there are other ways; the work that I desire is not done with guns and bullets and bombs". That is the voice of the crucified God, the God before whom all systems and ideologies crumble and all of our certainties fade into folly. It is the crucified God he gasps from the cross about those who are torturing and killing him "Forgive them Father, for they don't know what they are doing". And it is that same crucified God who stood with the victims and their families, knowing their terror and their agony and their loss. The crucified God in whom we place

our trust, our hopes and our lives is neither distant nor indifferent but profoundly here in the midst of our pain and fears.

This is the theology of incarnation, the Word made Flesh, the Emanuel – "God with us". A few days ago, we celebrated the birth of the Christ-child. In that celebration, we beheld the wonder of the God who comes to us in the vulnerability and complete dependence of a newborn child. This is the assertion of a radical and eternal love that takes us to places that we do not expect and eternally challenges us with its call to renewal and hope. That love that gives up on no-one, not even Herod. When, at last, Herod died, screaming in pain from a horrible disease that involved stench, maggots, pain and great discomfort, his enemies took pleasure in his suffering and found their own reasons for it. But they were just as wrong as those who try and find a moral rationale in the massacre of innocents. There isn't one. Nor is there any reason not to think that God felt Herod's pain, was in and with those who bore his stench, smoothed his pillow, cleaned up his mess. For that is our God: the God who feels; whose love is so prodigal that it overflows heaven and fills the Creation; whose arms, once outstretched to receive the nails, now stretch out to us, to all of us – young and old, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, innocent and guilty alike.

For us in the Church, it is enough to be in the place of God, to be the body of Christ on Earth, to stand with the innocent, and to whisper and to shout to the guilty that it doesn't have to be like this. To seek for reasons for such wickedness may be natural, but all but impossible when they cannot be reduced to a simple formula, or a readily comprehensible binary of good and evil. Job's response to God,at the end of that wonderful, extraordinary and deeply challenging book is our only possible response in this world of random and institutional violence:

Then Job answered the LORD:

2 *'I know that you can do all things,*

and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

3 *"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"*
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
4 *"Hear, and I will speak;*
I will question you, and you declare to me."
5 *I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,*
but now my eye sees you;
6 *therefore I despise myself,*
and repent in dust and ashes.'

But our repentance cannot be mere words. On the sign in Strickland Street which identifies this as St Leonards Anglican Church, there are also six words: "open doors, open minds and open hearts". Open does not mean vacant, but active and radical acceptance. That is the lived reality of repentance: the changing of our very selves; our wending always towards the God of love, justice and peace, and seeking ever to stand where God stands, to find out what God is doing and, in the words of Rowan Williams, "join in".

The Lord be with you.