

## Holy Innocents (2025)

IF the story of the Nativity ended where it often does on Christmas Eve, with the heavenly host proclaiming **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men”** and the shepherds going and finding the young child . . .

We might well be left with a feeling of peace, joy and inner goodwill, but an important piece of the puzzle would be missing.

What follows is not so peaceful, joyful and heartwarming.

Not long after the angels deliver their message of peace and goodwill enters opposition, treachery and even infanticide.

The Church in her wisdom has given us a corrective to this overly romanticized picture of the arrival of the heaven-sent Saviour by

honoring three martyrs on the three days immediately following Christmas Day.

- St. Stephen on the 26<sup>th</sup>. He was a martyr **by will and deed**. “Gallant Stephen crushed and torn by stones in ear-stopped anger hurled,” writes the Rev. George R. Stephenson.
- St. John on the 27<sup>th</sup>. He was a martyr **by will but not by deed** . . . meaning he was ready to die but in the wisdom of God was chosen for life. Instead of making a one-time stand for his Lord and going out in a blaze of glory as did Stephen, John endure many trials over many years, including exile on the Isle of Patmos. Tradition has it that he lived to a ripe old age.
- And finally, comes the Holy Innocents on the 28<sup>th</sup>. On this day we remember the babies in Bethlehem that Herod killed in an attempt to stamp out a rival king. These were **martyrs by deed but not by will** . . . meaning they did

not choose their fate. They died as martyrs without having heard the name of Jesus. St. Augustine of Hippo called them **“buds killed by the frost of persecution the moment they showed themselves.”**

Of these last, the Holy Innocents, they have not been forgotten or left behind in God’s scheme of things. Today’s passage from Revelation tells us: **“They are without fault before the throne of God.”**

When Jesus appears the second time, they will be a part of that great procession of the faithful accompanying Him. ///

We focus today on them along with the story of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt.

The first thing we should note as we reflect on this morning’s Gospel concerns the world into which Jesus was born. It was not that

different from the world in which you and I live. It was a dark and dangerous place.

The Newborn King was a marked man from the time of His birth.

And, if know history, we know that what was true of Jesus became true of His followers. Many of them would likewise face persecution and even death.

**“If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you,”** Jesus would go on to tell the Twelve (John 15:20).

Of late, we have been hearing a lot about atrocities against Christians in Nigeria.

One agency, the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law, reports that radical Islamists have killed over 52,000 people over the past 14 years.

In the first seven months of 2025 alone, the same organization says around 7,000 have been killed. That averages out to about 32 a day.

Because of this persecution, 15 million have done what the Holy Family was forced to do . . . flee their homes for safer locations.

Of course, Nigeria is not the only place Christians face persecution. North Korea is notorious.

Thankfully, Christians in the West have been spared the type of persecution experienced daily by many in places like Nigeria and North Korea.

Even so, we in the West dare not turn a blind eye to the suffering of our brothers and sisters around the world.

One agency which works to provide hope and help to persecuted Christians is Barnabas Aid. I know some of you receive their literature

and contribute financially. Keep up the good work!

But as we look outward, so let us pay attention to what is going on closer to home and stay vigilant.

A news story came across the wire earlier in December about the mayor of Mullins, S.C., a man by the name of Miko Pickett. He ordered the local beautification committee to take down a nativity scene in the town market.

The chairman of the beautification committee, Kimberly Byrd, refused. As she explained, the nativity of Jesus lies at the heart of the Christmas story. The majority of citizens agreed, and the display remains up.

Minor in comparison to what people in Nigeria face? /// Absolutely, but not insignificant. A good motto is: Think globally, act locally.

I am thankful in Blue Ridge we have a manger scene along with a Menorah in our city green. Only in Christian lands is such liberty possible. Guard that liberty.

So, the first thing we can take away from the story found in today's Gospel concerns the world into which Jesus was born. It was a world of danger and intrigue, greed and power. What Jesus experienced, many continue to experience.

Let us do what we can to bring light and healing and justice to such a world. Jesus will do the big bit when he comes, but there are things we can do in the present.

A comforting thought is that God is greater than the schemes of men. **“Confound their knavish plots,”** is a petition found in the British National Anthem. It is good one.

In today's account, we find Joseph being warned of God in a dream to get Jesus and Mary

out of harms way. They went down to Egypt even as the Israelites had done many years before to escape a deadly famine.

New Testament scholar D.A. Carson writes: **“Egypt was a natural place to which to flee. It was nearby a well-ordered Roman province outside Herod’s jurisdiction; and, according to Philo (writing circa A.D. 40), its population included about a million Jews.”**

So in Egypt the Holy Family not only found safety from Herod but also presumably a supporting community.

What merits our attention is: God spoke, and Joseph obeyed. You and I can learn from Joseph in this regard. When God speaks, we should obey.

But how do we know that it is God who is speaking and not some other spirit?



Here we have an advantage over those of old time. That advantage is the Holy Scriptures.

If we hear a voice telling us to do something that is contrary to the counsel of God's Word, it is not God's voice. It is the voice of a demon.

Also, as New Covenant believers, we have the Holy Spirit living within us to guide and direct us.

I have a story of my own where I believe God told me to do something and I was hard-pressed not to do it.

It took place when our late organist Eileen Kerr was in a nursing home. I had been left to feed her cats, Mozart and Chopin.

On this particular day, as I was feeding them, I had a distinct feeling to take Mozart, her favorite, to see her.

It made no sense, but the thought would not go away. Finally, I looked on the back porch and saw a carrier.

Then, almost against my will, I found myself stuffing that black cat into it and putting the container into the car, amid all sorts of wails from within.

Upon arriving at the facility, without stopping at the front desk, I carried him into her room, took him out, and put him on her bed. She reached forward and stroked him.

Less than an hour later, she was gone. Seeing him was what she needed to make the transition.

My point: Joseph teaches us to listen and obey God's call . . . in things both great and small, I might add.

What else might we take away from the account found in today's Gospel?

How about the importance of children? In Herold's world, they were dispensable.

In the larger Roman world, the same was true.

But the story of the Holy Innocents points us in the opposite direction: they are precious in God's sight.

The early Christians got this. In those days, unwanted babies, especially those with deformities and girls, would be left on trash heaps to die from exposure.

Christians would rescue them. /// Why? /// Because they knew each child was made in God's image and therefore worthy of protection.

May we not miss this part of the Holy Innocents' story.

Do your part. Stand up for the children of our land at every stage of their development. Make your voice heard.

In closing, the world into which Jesus came was messy and dangerous. It still is. But for believers it is not without hope.

The Lord has come and comes.

In the period in between, may we dare to do our part to bring about what is true and honorable and just.

