

"Righting the Wrong"

Matthew 2:13-18

December 26, 2010

Holy Innocents, Martyrs

After all the "hoopla" of Christmas, what did you expect when you arrived for this worship service? After the warm glow of the Christmas Eve service, the beauty and innocence of the little children telling the story of Jesus' birth, and the joyous celebration on Christmas Day, I'm sure you expected more of the same good feelings. Perhaps, it would not be quite the intensity of what happened here on Christmas, but I'm sure you expected more of the warm and fuzzy "afterglow" of Christmas.

However, instead of the goodness of the holiday season, you are forced to confront evil in our Gospel lesson. Instead of hearing of the actions of a loving and kind Heavenly King, you hear of the actions of a wicked and paranoid earthly monarch. Instead of hearing more about the birth of an innocent baby boy, you hear of the slaughter of an entire town's baby boys. Instead of being dazzled by the wonder of it all, you are stunned by the horror of it all. A king, in a paranoid attempt to protect his power, orders the brutal slaying of all of Bethlehem's baby boys. Whether the deaths numbered in the thousands (as legend has it) or, more likely, in the neighborhood of ten to twenty deaths, it is a horrific event that shocks us, especially since it occurs so close to a very blessed event: the birth of Jesus.

Why are we so shocked? Isn't it because we think that when something good happens, more good should follow it? We think that the birth of Jesus should bring peace and good will throughout the world. Since the birth of Jesus gives us such warm and fuzzy feelings, we think that it should have the same effect on others. Like the ghosts softened up old Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's story *The Christmas Carol*, the birth of Jesus should be able to soften up anyone, even old King Herod. Instead, we see him reacting in fury, rage, and murder, causing so much grief that it is seen as fulfillment of the prophet Jeremiah who said, "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

We see this same sort of scenario played out in our lives on a much lesser scale. Don't you find yourself believing that, if you are nice enough and do good things, then good should always follow it? If you are nice to people and treat them honestly, you expect them to treat you in the same way. Yet you often find yourself taken for granted, taken advantage of and kicked in the teeth. As

Christians, we think that, by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ and our best attempts to lead a Christian life, people will accept us and good things will happen to us. People outside the church will come flocking to the church if we just care about them enough and witness to Christ enough. Yet we find people rejecting Christ and His Church. We experience our share of bad things in life, people snickering behind our backs because we are too religious in our actions, or becoming upset with us because we are too "fanatical" in our beliefs. And we are surprised because all we tried to do was be good and decent Christian folks.

Well, it's time to stop being surprised. As the story in our Gospel reading for today indicates, often times it is evil that follows good and not more good. And it's been that way from the very beginning. God created everything and pronounced everything "very good". He intended for it to stay that way with only more good coming forth.

But then everything changed. An angelic being grew tired of his subservient role and wished to wrest control of the universe away from God. Satan, as we would later be called, rebelled against God's authority and was cast out of heaven into a place created especially for him and all who rebelled with him -- hell. As a result, Satan hated God so much and was so angry at Him that he wanted to ruin every good thing that God created. He started first with Adam and Eve, destroying their perfect fellowship with God - and that of their descendants - by leading them into sin.

Since that time, wherever God has done good, Satan has been right there to inflict evil in an attempt to destroy it. Even when God sent His Son into the world in order to rescue the world from vise-like grip which Satan had on it, Satan tried to destroy that plan, too. First, he used Herod to try and kill the Baby Jesus so that He could not grow up and carry out God's plan of rescue. When God thwarted that effort by Satan by sending Jesus, Mary, and Joseph off to the safety of Egypt, Satan bided his time. After Jesus grew into adulthood, He was baptized and ready to begin a good and glorious ministry. But Satan was right there to try and destroy that by tempting Jesus in the desert. He couldn't destroy Jesus so He tried to dissuade Him from His ministry of love and humble service by using His powers to serve Himself, to show off, and to gain worldly wealth and power. But Jesus refused. At the end of His three year ministry in which He did nothing but good and kind acts of love, Satan was right there again to try and bring evil out of good. Satan tempted the religious leaders to set out to destroy Jesus. Satan entered the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. Satan influenced Pontius Pilate to agree to Jesus' crucifixion, even though there wasn't a shred of evidence to convict

Him of any crime deserving death. Maybe Jesus would turn coward and run from God's plan for Him, but Jesus again refused and allowed His life to be taken on the cross in what any fair minded individual would say was a miscarriage of justice.

When we look at all of this evil and unfairness, we naturally cry out, "Why?" It has led some people to be cynical and come up with the phrase, "No good deed will ever go unpunished!" It has led some people to search for answers. A Jewish rabbi wrote a popular book titled, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People" in order to explain this mystery. You, too, might wonder why bad things happen to innocent victims. Why did these baby boys of Bethlehem, born at the same time the most wonderful miracle occurred, have to die? Why did Jesus, a man who preached love with His words and demonstrated only love with His actions have to die a grisly death on a cross? Why do you, as a Christian, have to suffer so many difficulties and injustices? Why does evil have to accompany good? Why doesn't God prevent evil from happening? Why didn't God protect those baby boys at Bethlehem? Why doesn't God intervene on some of the suffering that you endure?

There are no satisfying answers to these difficult questions. God obviously has the power to do anything, but sometimes He chooses to allow evil to happen. We cannot and should not try to figure why He does in some instances and not in others. However, we do know for certain that God can and does bring evil out of good. As His Word says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28)

God brought good out of the slaughter of the Innocents. By keeping Jesus safe in the midst of the slaughter of Innocents, God assured that we would not be stuck without a Savior. Instead, Jesus was allowed to survive so that He might carry out His mission to save all of mankind. The children who died have always been highly honored by the church as the first martyrs. As St. Augustine put it, "They are the first buds of the Church killed by the frost of persecution; they died not only for Christ, but in his stead."

God brought good out of the death of His Son. By allowing His only Son to endure the cross with all of its physical and spiritual suffering, God was able to forgive us all of our sin and, at the same time, maintain the integrity of His holiness. Through this seemingly bad course of events for Jesus, the greatest good was accomplished for us. We were redeemed by God, given Christ's own holiness in place of our sinfulness, and made to be His dearly beloved children by faith.

God brings good out of our suffering. As followers of Christ that means we will often go the same way of Christ in this life. That way is not the way of glory and success, but the way of the cross and suffering. Therefore, Peter tells us in his epistle, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you." Suffering and rejection are the expected way of the Christian, not the surprise. It is the rule, rather than the exception.

Yet, even though the evil of satanic persecution and suffering follows the goodness of our redemption by Christ, God can still make good come out of it. As in the way that physical exercise causes pain and yet that pain is good because it ultimately produces strength and fitness, so, in the same way, our suffering produces good things, as well. God uses our suffering to call our attention back to Him when has become too focused on ourselves. Difficult times teach us to trust in God, rather than ourselves, in a way that good times cannot. This produces a stronger faith that is able to endure without crumbling as the end of all things gets closer and the trials become more severe. Therefore, as Peter writes in his epistle, "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."

We are able to do this through the power of the Holy Spirit because we realize that there will come a time when this will all be changed. Although evil accompanies good now and God has to make good come out of evil, this is no patchwork solution. God is no Dutch boy, plugging His fingers in the dike to temporarily hold back the inevitable flood of evil. Evil cannot win and will not win, no matter how much it seems to be winning now. Satan has been defeated on the cross of Jesus Christ when He said, "It is finished!" Satan's power to defeat us was finished. Satan's power to intimidate us and frighten us was done away with when Jesus death itself by coming back from death to life. Death no longer Him, nor would it be able to hold those who are joined to Him by faith.

There will come a day -- the Last Day -- when evil will no longer accompany good. The wrong that began in the Garden of Eden many millennia before will be righted once and for all. There will be no more evil. The book of Revelation says that death, hell, and Satan himself will be cast into the lake of fire. Only more good will accompany good for us and it will last for all eternity in the presence and glory of God in heaven.

Sometimes you have to expect the unexpected. Nowhere is that more true than this day dedicated to the Holy Innocents. In the midst of the joy of salvation, we find the sorrow of slaughter. In the midst of birth, we find death. In the midst of something holy, we find something evil. Yet from

that evil, something even more unexpected happens: God works good. He accomplishes His plan of salvation despite the wiles of Satan. He saves us despite our sinful stubbornness. He preserves us in faith, despite all the evil and persecution which Satan can throw at us in this world. So, no matter how grim things may appear this day or in the coming year, expect the unexpected. The wrongs will be made right and what is right will last forever. Amen.