

SUNDAY 29 DECEMBER 2024 The Holy Innocents

(FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS)

Jeremiah 31.15-17

(1 Corinthians 1.26-29)

Matthew 2.13-18

Picture the scene: the school gate at the start of a new school year and especially at the start of school life for a three or four year old. If you have ever been a parent, you know what it is like: your heart is in your mouth. How is your little one going to manage without you? How will he or she behave at the moment of separation? Should you go in or just leave your child to him- or herself? Some of the other children are walking in to their new life looking rather self-assured, but others are already crying with anxiety and hanging on to their parents.

In a trice it is all over and your offspring has already disappeared inside, and as you walk home you wonder to yourself what your fear was all about. After all, isn't this how life is supposed to be – pushing out the boundaries to achieve independence?

In the Book of 1 Samuel and Luke, we witness similar situations from the biblical world. Samuel has been offered to the Lord, to service in the Jerusalem Temple, by his mother Hannah because the Lord has answered her prayers and enabled her to conceive. Imagine what devotion and strength of character it must have taken her to do this: but she is overwhelmed by the goodness of the Lord towards her and is determined to thank Him. So she makes what strikes us today as an enormous sacrifice. Samuel himself, under the tutelage of Eli the Priest, continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people, and went on to play a major role in the history of Israel, culminating in the appointment of King David to rule over the chosen people.

Fast forward about a thousand years. Jesus Christ has been born of the Virgin Mary through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Mary, and Joseph her husband, know that she has borne a very special baby, but no sooner has he been born than great danger looms. King Herod is furious because the three Wise Men have outwitted him and deprived him of the opportunity of “paying homage” to this competitor. So Mary and Joseph flee with Jesus to Egypt, leaving behind them a ghastly massacre of all children under two in Bethlehem and the surrounding area – a massacre which has been foretold by Jeremiah. Thus we have the Feast of the Holy Innocents, which was actually yesterday but we have agreed to commemorate it today. It reminds us of what a potentially dangerous world children today are born into: we only have to think of children in Ukraine and Gaza to understand the trauma in their terrified faces, as well as other dangers such as happened to the ten years old Sara Sharif here in Britain who suffered unimaginable violence at the hands of her own parents.

As daily life in Nazareth took over their thoughts and actions, so too it must have become very easy for them to forget what the Angel Gabriel, as well as Simeon the Priest, had said to Mary.

When Jesus is twelve he and his family are paying a visit to Jerusalem, in order to offer the usual sacrifices in the Temple. They leave, along with a crowd of other people from Galilee, without their son and only some time later do they realise that he is missing. They return to Jerusalem to look for him and eventually find him in the Temple with the teachers of the Jewish faith, both listening to them and asking them questions.

Although we are told that his parents did not understand his reply – that he had to be in his Father’s house – it is recorded at the same time that Mary treasured all these things in her heart. Perhaps also she now remembered what Simeon had said to her, that “a sword would pierce her soul” because of what sort of role Jesus would play in future, and where that role would lead him. As Jesus grew and developed Mary must have had a dawning idea of what lay in store for her and must have become aware that she was being gradually prepared for a sacrifice – the early loss of her son, both metaphorically and literally. Of course we cannot

know this for certain, but the words “treasured all these things in her heart” are a strong indication that God was constantly preparing her for what was to come.

It is the love of Hannah for God which has spurred her on to make her sacrifice. It is also love for God and obedience to His will which has enabled Mary to accept the daunting task of bearing the Messiah and now the even more daunting task of raising him in the increasing awareness of dangerous things to come. This sacrificial love is reflected also in the way in which we bring up our children, to grow and become daily more adventurous and independent, so that eventually they will be able to live without our tutelage altogether.

But the sacrifice which for Mary is more or less imminent will have extensive and ground-breaking meaning for all of humanity. Her son, Jesus, who has come from God to teach and show us all how to love Him and all our neighbours, will make a sacrifice which is unique in world history. The ultimate Holy Innocent will allow himself to be killed in order that our transgressions may be forgiven once and for all, and will then be raised again to life by God as a final, dramatic demonstration of His supremacy over all worldly things – including the thing many people dread most of all: death.

So we give thanks today for the example of Hannah and of Mary and of all parents, whose lives all entail some form of sacrifice for the sake of the good of those they are responsible for. It is the love which comes from Him who created us in His own image that enables us to behave as we do. So let us remember the responsibility we all have, whether we are parents or not, and let's pray for all children to keep them safe from the dangers of the world.

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