

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Well, we seem to be a bit mixed up with our readings today. The feast of the Epiphany, the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles, and the coming of the three wise men from the East, is still three days off. But today we hear the story of what happens right after they leave. Or I should say we hear part of the story.

In this section of the Gospel Matthew gives us three examples of how the coming of Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture. I know you were all paying attention and so you are probably wondering to yourselves, "I only heard two examples." And you are correct. The second example was omitted from our reading today. If you look closely at your bulletin, you will see that verses 16, 17, & 18 were left out. They fit into the gospel right after Joseph takes his family to Egypt and right before the Angel tells him that Herod the King is dead. They go like this.

“<sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled,  
because they are no more.’”

Why is it that this section was removed from our reading today? The incident that has come to be known as the slaughter of the Holy Innocents was remembered in our liturgical calendar by a special day last Tuesday. These children are remembered as the first Christian martyrs. But having a special day of their own is not the reason why they were removed from our reading today.

Biblical scholars have found problems with the historicity of these events related in the beginning of the gospel of Matthew. It appears that though Matthew was a great evangelist, he was not a very good historian. Many of the events that he uses to establish dates conflict with each other. There is no corroborating evidence of the slaughter from other sources and even the wise men are difficult to defend from an historical perspective.

But historical accuracy is not the reason this section was removed from our reading today. In point of fact I do not have the slightest idea why the writers of our lectionary decided to omit this section from our reading today. I hope it was an attempt to draw our attention to it...though I doubt it. Why would they choose to take this part out of the reading for the day, not even making it optional? What is it about this story that is so unsettling to us?

Could it be that it makes it look like our God of steadfast loving kindness is allowing all these children to be slaughtered just to make a point? I don't believe that is the case, but I can see how one might come to that conclusion. To approach this incident with any sort of integrity is to ask hard questions. We have wandered into the question of evil and why God allows it, and this is deep water.

Our trouble is further compounded because we confuse Matthew with an historian. He is not. Matthew is a theologian and an evangelist. The Gospel is not a history book but the good news. Matthew wrote this Gospel to try and explain an encounter with the living God, to tell the good news, not the daily news.

Our reading from Jeremiah today is a part of the hymn of rejoicing that the people of the North Kingdom sing as they return from their long exile in Babylon. It too is good news. The weeping of Rachel that is mentioned in the missing Gospel section is also part of that Hymn, though it too is missing from today's readings. In this hymn the Hebrews struggle to find meaning in their long exile and bondage in Babylon.

In the story of the Holy Family's exile to Egypt we hear an echo of that other exile. With the short excerpt of scripture about the weeping of Rachel, Matthew

connects these two stories, helping us to remember the love of God and the power of that love to redeem the People of God, even in the most harrowing of circumstances. At the same time, the senseless death of the innocents at the beginning of the life of Jesus foreshadows the senseless death that will end his life and it's greater meaning for us. That is why I believe Matthew puts this story into the Gospel and why we do ourselves a disservice when we remove it. It is very easy for us to confuse the good news with history.

In these days of cable and internet news we get news as it happens. In the past weeks we have been bombarded by stories, and pictures, and videos of various events that have happened around the globe in the last year. In addition to all the holiday fluff and economy updates, we've heard about the ongoing Syrian refugee problem, and more recently the flooding of the Mississippi. And of course we mustn't forget the endless updates on the status of the upcoming presidential primaries. Most of all this is just news and will never make it into the history books.

As an example, it was just over fourteen years ago that Al-Qaida attacked the twin towers in New York. In the fourteen years since, the historical significance of that event has changed as little by little we got a better overall picture of what actually happened. With the death of Osama Bin Laden, our continuing involvement in Afghanistan, and the birth of ISIS and the Syrian civil war, the historical significance of 9/11 is again modified a little.

With history, our search for truth is a search for what actually happened. We get so much history thrown at us, day in and day out, that we can miss the good news when it comes along, if we are not careful. The Gospel is a story written to try and explain an event in history, not describe it. In that way the Gospel is a search for a truth of a different kind. When we confuse the difference between these two truths we put ourselves at risk. Even we in the church are guilty of this on occasion. We must constantly be reminded that history is different from theology. They seek to accomplish different things.

The truth of the story of the Slaughter of the Innocents is a theological truth, not

an historical one. The truth is that God can take the most horrible, inhumane act of one human being against another and redeem it. This too is the truth of the incarnation. This is what Matthew is trying to tell us. Whether it is the sacking of an entire kingdom and the enslavement of a race of people, or the death of hundreds of innocent children in the region of Bethlehem, or the death of Jesus on the hard wood of the cross, nothing is beyond the redeeming power of God.

The theological truth of these Biblical stories is that if even these acts can be redeemed, then we need have no fear for our own sins.

Whether we look back over the last year, the last century, or the last millennium, it is far too easy to see the results of humanity's inhumanity against itself. It would be easy to despair of us ever changing. And the truth is that indeed we are powerless to make the change. The truth is that the power comes from above. We need only confess our sin, and ask forgiveness. And open ourselves to the redeeming power of God. That is the Good News that Matthew wants to share.

“Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.”

Amen.