

Feast of the Holy Innocents  
December 28, 2008

Rev. David A. Kind  
University Lutheran Chapel  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

INNOCENT BY GOD'S GRACE  
Jeremiah 31:15-17; Matthew 2:13-23

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Today is the feast of the Holy Innocents, the commemoration of the deaths of those children of Bethlehem whom the evil tyrant, King Herod, slew in a vain attempt to destroy the infant King, Jesus. The prophet Jeremiah spoken of this hundreds of years earlier: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." Bethlehem was the burial place of the patriarch Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. And at the time of Christ it was really famous for only two things, both of which had happened a thousand years earlier. It was the burial place of Rachel and the birth place of David. But now it would be famous for two more events, the birth of Christ, and the tragic slaughter of all of the male children under two years of age in that city.

St. Matthew tells us that this event fulfilled those prophetic words. But if you recall, the prophecy of Jeremiah has a bit more to it. It continues: "Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future, says the Lord, that your children shall come back to their own border." What a strange thing to say concerning the death of all of these children. Refrain your voice from weeping? Can you imagine the grief endured by these poor mothers of Bethlehem? And how shall they be rewarded when their children are dead? And what hope for the future? For how can these return to their own border who now lie bloodied and slain?

The Lord speaks this way through Jeremiah because these children who died that day are members of His Church; yes, they are saints whose future and hope was found in heaven, not on earth. And in their deaths they returned to their own border for they were citizens not only of the earthly Bethlehem, but also of the heavenly Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God. And so there was also hope and consolation for the mothers who mourned them; for through Christ whose birth their deaths helped announce to the world all the faithful of Israel would be redeemed and brought to those same heavenly borders, where mothers and children would have their joyous reunion in the presence of God Himself.

And how do we know these children whom Herod murdered are in heaven? Why are they called holy and innocent? There have been lots of opinions concerning this. Some have said that they are redeemed because their lives were given in service to Christ, announcing His advent through the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. In this sense, we can rightly call them martyrs, for their deaths confessed Christ Jesus on whose account they were put to death. And yet, dying because you happen to be around when some madman is trying to kill someone else, does not guarantee one's entrance into heaven.



Some have said that they are redeemed because they were baptized in their own blood for Christ's sake; and hence that is counted as a Baptism into Christ. One of our communion hymns today declares:

"Baptized in their own blood,  
Earth's untried perils o'er,  
They pass'd unconsciously the flood,  
And safely gained the shore."

All of this is true. They were washed in their own blood. And they have gained heaven. But is the one the cause of the other? Does dying a martyr's death count as a baptismal washing? Many have argued that it does; and while I have used the same phrase before myself in times past, I do not find anything in Holy Scripture that makes this point clearly. Jesus certainly speaks of His own death as baptism, saying to His disciples: "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Matthew 20:22); and speaks of their deaths in the same manner, telling them: "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with..." But this was spoken to men who had already received Holy Baptism, and hence was not intended to be the same thing as the Sacrament. And while the book of Revelation speaks of the saints being washed with blood, it is not with their own blood that they are cleansed, but with Christ's, which is a reference not to a martyr's death, but to the washing Christ bestows in the Sacrament of Baptism, which is a Word and water Baptism. So we cannot say with any certainty that their bloody death counted as some sort of baptismal washing.

So how, then, can we know for certain that they are in heaven. How can we say of them as we just sang in the hymn: "Beside the very altar gay, with palm and crown they seemed to play"? How do we know they dwell near God's altar? How do we know that they have been given the palm branch of victory and the martyr's crown of life? We know this for certain not on account of any speculation or pious wishes, but because God has included them in His Church and counted them among the faithful. And how can I say such a thing? I can say it because these were Hebrew children who would have been circumcised in accord with God's command and promise on the eighth day of their young lives. And as such they were included under God's covenant with Israel. He would be their God, and they would be His people; and as their God, He would save them by sending Christ Jesus who has won for all people forgiveness and salvation.

The promises God attached to being a faithful member of Israel certainly applied to these infants who had been brought into that community of faith through circumcision, and hence into Christ; for the faithful under the Old Testament are as much a part of the Church as are the faithful of the New. And these children through that Old Testament sacrament were given faith and included among God's people and given access to His promised blessings. Hence they are accounted as holy and innocent by God; for they have been forgiven and redeemed by Christ.

The question of whether or not infants and small children could have faith was simply not considered in the days of the Old Testament. They were simply part of Israel, and hence were under God's covenant and heirs to God's promises. Born into Israel, and circumcised if a male, faith was rightly understood as a gift from God, and was an Israelite's state of being unless or until someone rejected God's Word and promises and fell from grace. Faith could be lost, after all.

Today many people have real trouble believing that infants and children are capable of saving faith in Christ. They cannot, after all, understand the Gospel. They cannot make a clear confession of faith, not having the ability to speak. They cannot make a conscientious, informed decision regarding Christ and His work. And therefore they cannot dedicate themselves to Him, or invite Him into their hearts.

And, frankly, neither could any one of us. The idea that faith is something that you find within yourself, or something that comes from you at all, is a lie. It's one the devil's favorite lies, actually, for it deceives you into thinking that you have some small part in your salvation; and that small part, because it is not true, is wide open to his attacks. You see, what Christ has done for you is certain; but what you do on the basis of your own powers of will and reason in regard to Christ – that is no more certain than anything else that comes from you.

The Scriptures teach that all men are sinful from the time of conception and hence at complete enmity with God. Yes it is true, children are not born innocent, but sinful and in need of salvation. And apart from the Lord's intervention that sinful state is what rules the heart and mind of a person unless God intervenes. David rightly confesses in Psalm 51: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." Likewise St. Paul says: "the carnal mind is enmity against God." And again says: "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Until God has intervened, until one has received the Spirit unto faith, one cannot discern spiritual things, for such a one who has not yet received the grace of Christ is dead in spirit. What is impossible for the infant to do on his or her own, is impossible for the adult to do as well.

Moreover, because faith is a gift given by God, not something dependent upon our natural abilities or powers, it can be given to an infant or young child just as easily as to an adult; or perhaps even more easily. Infants and children, you see, do not raise the philosophical or reasonable objections to the faith that adults raise. They simply receive what they are given and trust it. This is why Jesus holds up children as examples of faithfulness and of greatness in the Kingdom of God. They receive what God gives and believe.

And how do we know for certain that they receive when they cannot yet confess it? We know because God has attached His Word and promise to certain things and has told us that these create faith and save people. In the Old Testament that sacrament was circumcision and inclusion in Israel. In the New Testament, following Christ's resurrection, the sacrament is Holy Baptism. You have heard already some of God's promises concerning Baptism this morning as Dupree was being baptized. There this little helpless boy was cleansed from the guilt of both his inherited sin and whatever sins he may have already added to it during his short life. There he was buried with Christ and raised up a new and holy creature, a creature clothed with Christ's righteousness. There he received the Holy Spirit unto faith. Here he has been made a son of God and an heir to all that God has done and promised.

Dupree cannot, of course, confess that faith now; but he doesn't need to. Because God Himself tells us what happened here this day in His Holy Word. And so whether he lives or dies (and of course we hope and pray he lives a long and blessed life) he is the Lord's, just as the children who died those many centuries ago in Bethlehem are the Lord's.

And so are all of us who abide in Christ through faith. And our certainty is not in anything we have done, but in the fact that He has also washed us in His blood through Baptism, and delivered His promises to us in His Gospel. He has through His incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, taken our place, won the forgiveness of our sins, and opened the way to life and immortality for us. And now on the basis of His grace, He calls us too holy and innocent. And one day, unless Christ returns before it comes, they will be able to say to those who mourn our deaths: "Refrain your voice from weeping... they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future... [they] shall come back to their own border." Thanks be to God. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧