

HOLY INNOCENTS

DECEMBER 28, 2012

Matthew 2:16 - 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 and under...

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WHY?... WHAT IF?... WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN?

These are the questions so often heard after a tragedy - whether the tragedy involved one person, an indeterminate number of people or a number in between. Why did it happen? What if it had not happened? What could have been if the victims had lived?

In Herod's case the "WHY" was anger and fear. The Magi told Herod of the birth of a king and their plans to see him, worship him and honor him with gifts. But they also disobeyed Herod by not returning to his court to let him know the exact place of Jesus' birth. How dare they not follow his request and instead return home by another route. Their deceit would be a motive for tragedy.

Fear – Herod's fear was that an infant born in Bethlehem really could become the King of the Jews. He had already killed his own sons for the same reason – that they could usurp his power as king. If his fear could lead to such extreme measures with his own family, I doubt if he had even a slight twinge of his conscious about killing all those unknown children in Bethlehem nor a care about the sorrow and heartbreak of the parents.

Quodvultdeus, bishop of Carthage, points out that in a twist of irony, it was in the sacrifice of those children that Herod paid homage to them. His actions, not theirs, elevated those children to martyrs bearing witness to the glory of Christ.

WHAT IF?

What if those babies had lived? What would they have become? – Shepherds, carpenters, weavers, wine makers, inn keepers or any ordinary profession of the times. Caryll Houselander points out that if they had lived and if their destinies were similar to any of those mentioned, those children would certainly be long forgotten – they would have no part in us now, no comfort for our sorrow, no redeeming for our sin, no beauty for the lifting of our hearts and no lesson to sustain our hope. Their Eternity would not have been as it is...an unimaginable, unending delight in God.

We know that our actions do not always have the desired endings – as humans we do not have the power to craft the future for our benefit and purpose. We wish it were so - and without much effort we can acknowledge our and others' efforts to try just that. Even Herod as king could not accomplish it – his plans were diverted by God's intervention in a dream.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN?

Sam Portaro says the possibility of what could be is inherent in every child – it is almost our first sensation at seeing an infant. He calls it the fearsome mystery in a future that is yet unseen. How shall this baby grow, into what type of person, what shape will this incarnate future take? He continues by saying: we are not comfortable with mystery, yet despite our attempts to eliminate God from our lives, we have never fully succeeded in killing off God's possibility. It is relatively easy to distance ourselves from past notions of God. It is also increasingly easy in our independence to move through life without reliance upon or acknowledgement of a God present to our experience. But in the dim recesses of a life we cannot control, God lives – like a child in a manger. And neither we, nor Herod, can live with that. We want no part of what we cannot control....We look back in wonderment at Herod and ask how it could have happened. What could have been is not a question for us to answer.

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WHY? +++++ WHAT IF? +++++ WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN?

Bethlehem in Judea, Oklahoma City, Columbine, Virginia Tech, an Amish school, Arizona, Aurora, Newtown...

"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"