

It has only been a week since Christmas Day, but the feasting is done and the presents are all opened, if not actually broken or lost. After the rushing around to buy, wrap, prepare, and decorate, we have run headlong into the reality of bills coming due, weather still freezing, and newspaper headlines filled with the standard bad news. And if you think that I am here to proclaim, "Cheer up! Things are not all that bad," you weren't listening to this morning's Gospel lesson, usually referred to as "The Slaughter of the Innocents".

King Herod may seem extreme to us, but he was the predictable result of combined paranoia and power. He had been given his kingdom by the Roman empire, and he had no intention of losing it to anyone. He had killed at least two of his own sons, lest they rebel against him, and murdered his wife when he thought that she could be part of a plot. Augustus Caesar is said to have remarked that it would be safer to be a pig in a hungry peasant's household, than a son in Herod's court.

When the Magi did not return from Bethlehem to tell the ruler exactly where to find the newborn king of the Jews, Herod was enraged. The logic of paranoia showed the obvious course of continuing the elimination of any who might oppose him, so he sent troops to Bethlehem to murder any child who might be the one he sought.

While Jesus was hurried to Egypt by his terrified parents, those living in Bethlehem suffered a murderous rampage by Herod's army. All male children two years old and younger were put to death. What matter if eight or ten children were killed when there was only a need to get rid of one. The solutions of force always seem to bring with them what we have learned to call "collateral damage".

Meanwhile, Jesus, Mary and Joseph were now refugees in a foreign country, without friends or support. Even when Herod died and Joseph could lead the three of them back to Palestine, they could not return home for fear of Herod's equally brutal son, Archelaus. They had to keep going until they arrived in Nazareth. There also they knew no one, had no family connections to offer help or shelter. And family was critically important in

that culture. The Son of Man was still a refugee in search of some kind of home.

It is like a bucket of ice-water thrown over our proclamation of Emmanuel, God with us; we want to protest at how unfair it is. But we need to remember that God became incarnate in our real world where the same story is both old and still very current.

Surely we have all watched as millions flee for their lives from war zones. We saw the newspaper pictures of young children killed in Aleppo, Syria so that a dictatorial regime can remain in power. Most of us saw the newspaper picture of a child's body washed up on a beach in Turkey. The boy, about the age of Jesus the refugee, was drowned when his father could not get him to safety.

Closer to home, we have just come through a bitter election marked by a storm of paranoia, the intentional manipulation of fears, to convince us that we are threatened by any who are different: refugees, or gays or blacks or Muslims. It seems like a bizarre contradiction to the Holy Feast Day we celebrated just one week ago, attended by the proclamation of angels, "Do not be afraid."

But perhaps if Christmas is to have meaning for anyone beyond the small group of those already convinced, it needs to be alive in the middle of the world as it actually is. Joy Carroll was one of the first women ordained to the priesthood in The Church of England. She wrote in an article for a church magazine:

When I was a priest back in London, carol singing around the parish really seemed to get everyone in the mood for Christmas. We always had a real accordion and an old-fashioned lantern on a pole; we were always wrapped up warmly, and we would stop and sing carols under selected streetlights. It was a scene fit for a Christmas card.... People came out in droves, mostly non-churchgoers, to listen and put money in our collecting box for the homeless. When we were finally all sung out, we would trudge back to someone's house

for mulled wine and minced pies...all very English. Great memories!

But we need to beware! This sanitization of the Christmas story is a relatively recent development. It's interesting that before the Victorian era, Christmas songs were much more likely to reflect the reality of Jesus' entry into our world. Carols did not hesitate to refer to the blood and sacrifice, or the story about Herod slaughtering the innocent children.

We Christians like to talk about putting Christ back into Christmas, but let's not forget to put Herod back into Christmas. Herod represents the dark side of the gospel. He reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus entered a world of real pain, of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, a refugee, and finally he became a victim to the powers that be. Jesus is the perfect savior for outcasts, refugees, and nobodies."

The issue for us is that we do not want to be the outcasts, refugees and nobodies. So we are easily seduced by those who tell us that we should use whatever power is needed to prevent our becoming vulnerable and weak. But power does something terrible to all who rely on it. It cuts us off from each other, and from the One who came to save us.

If Jesus had come to be make things right through force, he would have been born in a palace, would have had an army. There would have been no cross, no resurrection. While the world around us is often brutal and frightening, we are asked by God not to turn away, but to enter more deeply into that reality, to be the light lifted up for all, even if the lifting up is on a cross.

So this year, when it is time for the Altar Guild to put away the crèche, the shepherds, wisemen, camels and donkey can go back in their box. But perhaps Mary, Joseph and the baby should be set on a windowsill, looking

toward the world that needs them, now more than ever. We can see them looking beyond this sanctuary, and be reminded that we are called to go out there – and that we are called to present out there in the name of the one who came as Emmanuel – God with us.