

The world around us has moved on from the Christmas feasting and celebration, to cleaning up crumpled wrapping paper, consoling children for already broken toys, and beyond that to post-Christmas sales and returns. Within the church we aren't nearly done with Christmas itself which has 12 days; we're only up to day 8. We're just always out of step, it seems.

The Gospel lesson today seems to put us even more out of the mainstream, with the difficult story of what is usually called, "The Slaughter of the Innocents". Where on earth did our jolly Christmas celebration go? Well, it has gone right into the lived reality which surrounds us every day – the reality of pain and suffering into which the son of God was born.

We should remember that what we think of as a "normal" Christmas is an invention of the commercial culture beginning in the era of Queen Victoria. Before the the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christmas was understood to be deeply rooted in thousands of years when everyone knew that children could be killed by any king or lord for any or no reason. This was reflected in Medieval Christmas pageants of a kind which you did not see this or any other year.

Nor do we often hear songs such as the Coventry Carol:

Lullay, Lulla, thou little tiny child  
By-by lully lullay  
Herod the king, in his raging  
Charged he hath this day  
His men of might in his own sight  
All children young to slay.

Then woe is me  
Poor child for thee  
And ever mourn and say  
For thy parting  
Nor say nor sing  
By-by, lullay, lullay

Everyone knew as well that people could be forced from their homes and communities at any time. You, like many people may have a drawing or carving that shows Mary on a donkey led by Joseph, carrying her baby to an unknown future. Our scripture today mostly ends there, apart from a mention that the family stayed in Egypt until Herod had died.

So we don't often think of what comes next. But what was it like to live far from home, far from family, surrounded by people they did not know. Surely they were the object of the kind of comments that refugees have heard in our own country: "They dress differently, they worship in odd ways that may offend our own gods... they talk with an accent – why can't they learn Coptic?"

Even when Herod died, his son was on the throne, and the family did not dare to return to their home. Instead they journeyed farther - to Galilee, and then to more remote Galilee, in Nazareth. Here they could hope to be safe, but still without friends or families near for support. They remained refugees, living as best they could. God has become the one who is not only incarnate into a dangerous world, but is also one who does not have a home. Herod has been thwarted, but not exactly defeated as the world categorizes things.

And the pain of all this must be heard and mourned even now if Christ is not to be trivialized, made into a God who may be among us, but is not fully with us. If we are to know Christ as alive in us and for us, we need to hear the call of the Gospel deep in our real lives. We live in a time of chaos and alienation, with the poor ever poorer and the rich incredibly richer, the refugees overflowing on our borders. We live with a catastrophe that justifies the manger scenes set up this Christmas in which Mary, Joseph and Jesus are all present, but are in separate chain link cages.

Surely if Jesus is present among us, and his name is to be more than a casual blasphemy, we need to learn how to reach out and minister to those trapped on the edges of our country. This past fall, a group of clergy and laity from the Episcopal church got up earlier than usual in the morning in order to drive to Fort Snelling. They were there to protest the fact that a building named after our own Bishop Whipple is occupied by the Midwest headquarters of ICE. The protestors went there to call loudly for the removal of the name Whipple from the building and for Minnesota to be officially named a Sanctuary State.

In other places, churches have chosen to give sanctuary to undocumented immigrants, although this is not always safe. The Christian Century reported on the case of Samuel Oliver-Bruno who was sheltered by a UMC in Durham NC. He had an order to prevent his deportation back to Mexico, on humanitarian grounds. His wife suffers from Lupus and heart failure.

In November last year he was told to present himself for fingerprinting in order to continue that protective status. With pro bono legal advice, he chose to comply with that order, in spite of the risk entailed in leaving the church's grounds. The story reports:

On November 23, Oliver-Bruno and his 19-year-old son, Daniel, joined several of the church's pastors and congregants for the drive to the immigration office. There they were met by more than 40 other church members, friends, other Christian leaders, and activists.

A handful walked into the building with Oliver-Bruno, where he was given papers to fill out. When he finished, he walked over to the processing line said pastor Cleve May who accompanied him.

Seconds later, four plainclothes ICE officers tackled Oliver-Bruno and his son to the ground. They then whisked him down the corridor and out to a van waiting in the rear of the building.

For two hours church members and friends surrounded the van, chanting prayers and singing songs, preventing the driver from backing out. Police arrested an additional 27 people, including several pastors, and the van drove off with Oliver-Bruno to the Wake County Detention Center in Raleigh.

The pastor said, “The fingerprint was actually bait. Do we really want to be a people with a government that uses Gestapo sting tactics?”

Unless we are Native Americans, we are all descendants of immigrants to this country. But more importantly, as Christians we are religious descendants of refugees who had to flee to another country for fear of violence. This, also, is part of the Christmas story – the full story that goes beyond angels, shepherds and traveling wisemen.

We need all 12 days of Christmas to remember the deaths of all the innocents slaughtered by the powers that be, all the refugees struggling for a home. We need to hear the whole Christmas story, not to be angry, or hopeless or defeated but to fold the story deeply into our life of prayer, to be reminded that God alone is our salvation in the midst of all that the world may bring against us.

The Holy Christmas Gift to us is God’s own incarnate coming to share our suffering, die our death, and show us our resurrection. Oh, come let us adore, and let us overcome the world by our love, by our hope and by our vision of Glory.

