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The Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Fearful Symmetry

The following article of Fr. Ralston's is reprinted from 1995. Its message is timeless.

The Commemoration of the Holy Innocents on the third day of Christmas is one of the most profound and most disturbing occasions in the whole of the Church year. It is for me an emotional and theological challenge which must not be avoided, and in our own particular world it has become an event of peculiar, indeed devastating meaning and importance.

When William Blake wrote his two contrasting poems, a song of innocence (The Lamb) and of experience (The Tiger) he set the paradox of the holy innocents in a frame both precise and suggestive: "Little Lamb, God bless thee" in juxtaposition with the fearful burning tiger of the right is Blake's "fearful symmetry". and he asks the question: "did He who made the lamb make thee?"

The answer is yes, and the celebration of the Holy Innocents in conjunction with the celebration of the child born to us and surrounded by the animals, the shepherds, the wise men, and his just and loving parents makes the point unforgettable. This child will become the sacrificial lamb slain for the evil and sin of the world, and the actuality of that is presaged in the killing of the children of Bethlehem by that Herodean tiger.

There is a Christmas carol, which catches this strange truth: "Sing lullaby. Hush, do not wake the infant King. Soon comes the cross, the nails, the spitting. Then in the grave at last reposing. Sing lullaby. "Our celebration of the most joyous, glorious gift of God, of the bringing to bear upon our world the divine light and grace and charity is shadowed by the violent murder of other children. The Gospel has advanced through the world accompanied by fierce disorder. Our Lord speaks throughout his life of swords and disturbances and persecutions. When he took our nature upon him he took all our capacity for brutish evil and hideous crime. He knows us to the very depths of our being.

The miracle of Christmas is that beneath the horror is the peace. This peace is made by Christ, indeed is embodied in him from his cradle to his grave, and the basic innocence of our nature, as created for us by

God the Father, is carried by him through every temptation and every violence, into the jaws of death and the darkness of the tomb, and finally returned to God in its restored and triumphant purity.

In this process the New Testament says he was "made sin on our behalf", and the poets understand what it means. T. S. Eliot grasps it perfectly, and adopting Blake's image, writes: "In the grievousness of the year came Christ the tiger." So the child, the little lamb of God, becomes both the sacrifice and the victor. He redeems the tiger in us by identifying himself with it. God did indeed frame that fearful symmetry, and is the creator both of lamb and tiger.

The shadow cast on Christmas by the murder of the innocent children, the association of this joyous feast with the price of blood, is one of those things that cannot really be understood. When we read in St. John that "the darkness comprehended it not" we must construe the word richly: the darkness neither could understand nor overcome this light and this life when it appeared. Nor could the violence of the passion and the cross, the death and the tomb, those harsh realities of the blood, conquer the purity, the fundamental innocence of the lamb, or put out the light that began to shine in the cradle. The other side of that birth is another- mysterious text: "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross . . ."

There is a sense therefore in which the cross was "pleasing" to God; just as in the collect for Holy Innocents we come across the tough, severe truth that God made infants to "glorify [Him] by their deaths." that God can make the wrath of man turn to his praise is fundamental to His absolute power and mercy. It leads us into the most mysterious and deepest secrets of his Being, which will I think remain ever beyond us. These are those depths in Christianity which we inherit from Deutero-Isaiah: "I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I God do all these things; "and which form the theological basis for that most terrible petition in the Lord's own prayer: "Lead us not into temptation . . ." Between Isaiah and that prayer comes the book of Job. We sense these depths everywhere in our faith, but seldom confront them. They are realities we attempt to pass by on the other side. But they are part of the fearful symmetry of God in Christ.

What we must not do, in peril of our souls, is to forget what is meant by "took our nature upon him", "was made flesh." The abuse and slaughter of children ordered by a vile and wicked politician, continues throughout the world. It is an evil so dreadful and hideous that the mind recoils from it. I do not think we can bear to look at it directly for a sustained period. It makes explicit Wordsworth's sense of "the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world."

It is not only the slaughter of the innocent by all the dreadful men of death; and the abuse of the living children by the hideous and fetid imaginations of those more powerful than they. It is also what I do not hesitate to call the holocaust of abortion. Of all the innocent, the totally unprotected and wholly dependent unborn are the most pitiful. They are being referred to now as "tissue". What we do to our own human nature in terms of abuse when we de-humanized the unborn children is too hideous to contemplate. It may be the unforgivable sin because it is a sin which damages the very essence of our common humanity. Whether that is so or not there is no question of the

seriousness and severity of such actions. Nowhere is Jesus more formidable or austere than when he deals with our abuse of children: "It were better for that man if a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea."

Our Lord was once a little child. He was cared for even though St. Joseph was doubtful when he first heard of Mary's conception. And he remembers not only his own death, but the deaths of those children who were murdered because of him. The Gospel lesson for those children has the overwhelming reference to Jeremiah: "Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not." The feast of the Holy Innocents is the most paradoxical day of the Christian year. Next to Passion Sunday, in its fearful symmetry, it is also the most painful and mysterious. Never have its pain and its mystery been more terrifying than in our own dreadful world.

The Rev. Dr. William H. Ralston

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