

Reflection:
The Massacre of the Innocents
Where is God when innocents suffer?
Gingins
28 December 2025

Hosea 11: 1; Jeremiah 31: 15-17; Matthew 2:13-18

[SLIDE 1] Today we wrestle with one of the most troubling passages in all of Scripture: the Massacre of the Innocents, ordered by King Herod. **[SLIDE 2]** Herod the Great was Rome's client King of Judea for 33 years. He was a very effective ruler: He protected the Jewish people from cultural annihilation by the power of Rome, expanded their economic prosperity, kept them more or less united and substantially extended the Temple in Jerusalem. The Roman Senate gave him the title 'King of the Jews'. Yet Herod was a ruthless and appallingly vicious person. Historians record his murders of hundreds of people, including one of his ten wives, three of his sons, numerous in-laws, political rivals and Pharisees.

Hearing of the birth of a baby King of the Jews, fearful of losing power to a rival claimant, King Herod ordered the slaughter of boys in Bethlehem two years old and under. **[SLIDE 3]** Matthew 2: 16 is the only first-century record of this event. Bethlehem was a biggish village at that time, so the number of babies and toddlers massacred was probably no more than 20. That's 20 too many.

This is a different story from the joyful one we usually associate with Christmas – with the bright star, a manger, cute farm animals, adoring shepherds, choirs of angels. This is a story drenched in

blood and tears. It is a story that raises impossible questions. And it is a story that many prefer to skip.

But Scripture does not look away from appalling suffering; and neither can we.

[SLIDE 4] Naming the question: “Why does God allow this?

Matthew tells us that when Herod’s soldiers arrived, “*a voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation.*” **[SLIDE 5]** Matthew is quoting the prophet Jeremiah. In 586 BC, the village of Ramah, today a Palestinian village known as Ar-Ram, 8 kilometres north of Jerusalem, was the assembly point of all the people of Judah, who had been captured by the army of the Babylonians. That army had just sacked Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon’s temple and murdered thousands of Jews. From Ramah, most of the survivors were deported to exile in Babylon.

An analogous modern event was the Rafle du Vél d’Hiv, the roundup of Jews from all over France in July 1942. **[SLIDE 6]** Jews were transported from the Vélodrome d’Hiver in Paris to Drancy and Pithiviers, and then ... to Auschwitz. Here is a photo of a few of those Jews. **[SLIDE 7]** And here we see busloads of Jews arriving at Drancy. It was an experience like this that Jeremiah and Matthew say Rachel wept over, metaphorically.

[SLIDE 8] Why Rachel? Ramah was in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. The mother of Benjamin was Rachel, one of the wives of the patriarch Jacob. Hence Jeremiah’s poetic reference to Rachel’s wailing and lamentation for her murdered and exiled children.

Rachel’s cry echoed across history, and it still echoes today.

When violence claims the innocent, when children suffer, when the vulnerable are crushed by the strong, people ask:

“If God is good, if God is powerful, if God loves His creation, why do such things happen?”

This is the age-long question of **[SLIDE 9] theodicy**, literally the justice of God: How can an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God coexist with horrendous evil and atrocious suffering? This not just an academic exercise; well, certainly not for me. I spent nearly two years, between the ages of 30 and 32, wrestling angrily with God over this very question. With help from my father-in-law, I came through that time. Since then, I have spent a lot of time studying, thinking and praying through this issue. And I still wrestle with God, perhaps a bit less angrily. I have come to some tentative conclusions – not clichés, not platitudes, not copouts – but some guidance into how to think about this, which I will share with you this afternoon.

The Bible does not cover up or silence that question; the Bible gives that question a voice – Rachel’s voice. Rachel’s lament is Scripture’s permission to grieve honestly and to ask God hard questions. Faith does not forbid the “why”; faith encourages our anguished questioning and brings the “why” to God.

[SLIDE 10] God is present even when evil acts

We might imagine that God’s absence explains tragedy. But in Matthew’s account, God is not absent.

God speaks to Joseph in a dream. God warns him of the danger. God sends the Holy Family to safety. God’s speaking through the

prophets Hosea and Jeremiah is recalled, interpreted and applied to the present situation.

Yet the unimaginable, the unbearable still happens. Innocent babies die, violently.

The presence of God does not always mean the avoidance of evil. Instead, Scripture shows us that God's presence coexists with human freedom, freedom that can be twisted toward horrific ends. God did not create or direct Herod's cruelty; Herod was responsible for his own deeds. The darkness in this story, the cruel and cowardly political calculation, the orders to murder, this is human darkness, human responsibility.

So, where **was** God in the midst of all this horror? He was **born** into it.

[SLIDE 11] God's response to evil is not distance or indifference, but incarnation

In Jesus, God comes into a world where tyrants rule, where innocent blood is spilled, where mothers and grandmothers weep. He does not stand above the suffering or apart from it. He is **born** into it. For me, this, **incarnation**, is the deepest meaning of Christmas: God coming into the world, taking on humanity, to share human suffering. This is something to celebrate every day, not just at Christmastime.

This is how the story of the Messiah begins. Jesus is a baby. He is carried into Egypt helpless and vulnerable, like the children whom Herod murdered. That is a profound mystery of the Christian faith: God chooses the path of the weak, of the suffering, of those living with trauma, not the path of the violent and powerful.

The child Herod seeks to destroy is the same Jesus who will one day heal the sick, raise the dead, and stand against every power of violence and cruelty.

The heart of theodicy is not a philosophical argument or even a theological one. It is a Person. God's answer to evil and suffering is not an explanation from afar but active participation from within.

[SLIDE 12] Responding to Rachel's tears

Matthew quotes Jeremiah: “*Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.*”

Rachel **refuses** to be comforted. **[SLIDE 13]** And she is not condemned for her refusal. Her response to such a traumatising event is completely normal and understandable. **[SLIDE 14]** There is nothing that can console such pain, no words, no actions. Rachel refuses to be comforted, yet God does not refuse her.

In the original text of Jeremiah chapter 31, **[SLIDE 15]** Rachel's tears are followed by a promise: “*Keep your voice from weeping ... your children will return.*” It is a promise of restoration after exile, of remaking of identity after trauma.

The massacre of the innocents is not the last word. Evil never gets the final chapter in God's story. God will one day restore, heal, and redeem the situations that we and our loved ones face in ways beyond our present seeing. But I cannot end this reflection with vague promises of justice, deferred until the end of time.

The Innocents of Bethlehem foreshadow Jesus, who will also face political violence and unjust death, on the cross. If Herod's

massacre raises the question of theodicy, the cross and the grave reveal part of God's answer.

[SLIDE 16] God's answer to innocent suffering: The Cross

God suffers with us. God suffers for us. Suffering and death linger and bleed into resurrection. Suffering doesn't end, death doesn't end, but God transforms their meaning through resurrection.

Christianity does not claim that suffering is good. It claims that suffering is not ultimate.

The same Jesus who escaped Herod as an infant, defeated death as a man. In Jesus, God declares that every innocent life, every life, matters infinitely, so infinitely that God Himself becomes the Innocent One.

Through incarnation, by becoming human, God has entered the suffering of the world. Through the Cross, God bore that suffering. God's people must do the same. God's response to suffering includes **us** – the Body of Christ in the world.

[SLIDE 17] Our calling: To resist evil and embody God's compassion

Let's consider some ways in which we can resist evil and embody God's compassion.

[SLIDE 18]

1. *We are called to protect the vulnerable and weak*

We do that in our own church community through careful attention to safeguarding. And we can support financially the work

of non-government organisations and community service organisations throughout the world who engage in protection of children and vulnerable adults. Some La Côte Church members do that through the work of the Association Coup de Main, accompanying refugees and asylum seekers and maintaining the Nyon Food Bank. Each year, our church gives modest amounts of the offerings we take in to institutions such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Embrace the Middle East, which are engaged in protection and support of the vulnerable.

[SLIDE 19]

2. We are called to comfort those who weep

We do that in our church community through pastoral care, coming alongside those who are suffering, listening attentively, not judging, mostly not giving advice, but praying with them. Some of us visit people in hospital and in hospice care.

[SLIDE 20]

3. We are called to speak truth to Herods of our time

[SLIDE 21] Here are some 20th century Herods. They were responsible for the death of tens of millions.

And there are Herods in our age too, political leaders who, just like Herod, authorise the killing of children and other non-combatants for the sake of their own political survival or aggrandizement. Here are a few recent Herods. [SLIDE 22] And contemporary Herods kill through deliberate neglect too.

[SLIDE 23] I have read reports of authoritative researchers working for Boston University, UCLA and *The Lancet*, who predict that

budget cuts in humanitarian and development assistance between 2025 and 2029 will lead to at least 14 million excess deaths by 2030, of whom 4.5 million will be children. Four and a half million children will die, who would not otherwise have died, because of cuts to health, nutrition, water and sanitation, child protection, education, psychosocial support and anti-gender-based violence programmes. The massacre of innocents ordered by King Herod is dwarfed by the one provoked by today's Herods.

[SLIDE 24] But we can speak truth to these Herods. In our worship services, and at home, we pray for righteousness and peace in the world. Prayer is most effective when it leads to action. What can we **do**? We can sign petitions circulated by reputable agencies. We can write to our elected representatives, ask for a meeting, and convey to them our concerns about the erosion of democracy and human rights and associated harms to children. We can give money to support NGOs campaigning for democracy and human rights in many countries.

[SLIDE 25]

4. *We are called to oppose violence and stand firmly on the side of justice and mercy.*

Those actions I just mentioned – prayer, petition, meeting our elected representatives, financial support for NGOs – they all contribute to the fulfilment of this call.

And just a brief, personal word about prayer: Many years ago, in an evening service at St Michael's in Paris, I was deeply moved by a prayer in the lyrics of the Hillsong worship song, *Hosanna*. The line goes, **[SLIDE 26]** “Break my heart for what breaks yours.” Break

my heart, Lord, for what breaks *yours*. It has been my recurrent prayer ever since. I encourage you to pray this prayer too.

God's heart is broken by the massacre of innocents, the murder of children, the neglect and abuse of the vulnerable. I find that praying the Lord's Prayer helps me to focus my heart on justice, mercy and peace. We pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Protecting children and vulnerable people from harm, comforting the grieving, opposing evil and practising justice and mercy – these are huge contributions to the fulfilment of God's will. Our prayer, our action, can make a meaningful difference.

[SLIDE 27] Conclusion: God's response in a weeping world

The Massacre of the Innocents is a painful reminder that the world is not as God intends. But it is also a reminder that God has not abandoned that world.

Incarnated in Jesus, God enters the darkness, shares the tears, bears the wounds, suffers and dies, redeems the lost and promises a day when every Rachel will see her children restored.

Until that day, we weep, we pray, we act, and we trust the God who knows every tear – and who will one day wipe them all away.

Amen