

29 December 2020

Writings: Children

Herod sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under (Matthew 2:16).

Whenever a charity is trying to raise money or a television journalist is covering a war, famine or natural disaster, their presentation often contains scenes of suffering children. These images drive home the tragic effects of some event by appealing to our emotions. Children are vulnerable and require protection. The viewer wants to help them. Yet, this vulnerability is what makes them an attractive target for tyrants. If you want to force adults to comply with a demand, threaten their children. Another option is to manipulate children to turn against their parents before the young realize what they have done. In wars, famines and extreme poverty it is often children who suffer the most: the last to get medical care, food or shelter and so they are reduced to begging or being exploited to survive. They are considered expendable.

In today's Gospel, King Herod kills all the children two years of age and under living in and around Bethlehem in an effort to eliminate the "infant king of the Jews" who was seen as a potential rival.

Historians tell us Herod was ruthless in dealing with anyone who was seen as a threat to his power. He killed several members of his immediate family (wives, sons and daughters-in law) who had designs on one day replacing him. Herod also used force to crush the efforts of Jewish nationalists to drive the Romans from their territory. Since his family was only half-Jewish, he used projects such as adding on to the Jerusalem Temple to win support from the people in Judah. Matthew's story of the "slaughter of the innocents" seems to fit in with Herod's personality and behaviour.

Although the story was likely intended to explain why Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived in Egypt for a while, it also highlights how the strong treat the weak. In times of social distress, such as this pandemic, the gap between the two groups increases. The number of cases of Covid 19 and deaths resulting from them is far greater among the poor and racial minorities. These people do not have the luxury of working from home but are employed as clerks stocking shelves in crowded stores, cleaners working in hospitals or Long Term Care Homes where the virus is present or fast food restaurants where take out is allowed. They do not have cars and must rely on public transit where the risk of transmission is higher. They do not live in single family homes but crowded high rise buildings which are often not well cleaned or maintained. What is often forgotten is many of the individuals in these situations are children. Even if children are less likely to get the virus, a parent with Covid 19 will have difficulty providing the necessities and proper care for them. While many companies report high profits and pay dividends to their shareholders, these children are forgotten.

This pandemic may provide Catholics and other people of faith with an opportunity to think more carefully about how our society treats the weak (especially children). Child poverty and food insecurity existed long before Covid 19. On the societal level, these issues can be addressed through government programs and private charitable organizations. On the individual level, a donation to a food bank or soup kitchen is at least a first step. It is also important to listen to the hopes and fears of those who need help and treat them with respect. Children, whose experience in life is limited, need to be re-assured they are valued and can look forward to a better future.

Children do not exist to make us feel sentimental or to be exploited. They are made in the image and likeness of God and should be treated that way.