

Trinity College Cambridge
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FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT

The Massacre of the Innocents

Pieter Brueghel's *The Massacre of Innocents*

Amos 8: 4–10 Matthew 2: 16–18

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The event which has come to be known as the massacre of the holy innocents – when Herod, ‘in his fury’ as the carol has it, did away with the boys in and around Bethlehem in a bid to do away with Jesus – has been depicted by many great painters. Giotto’s depiction has a gruesome heap of babies. Rubens painted it as you might expect, with buxom mothers with equally buxom infants. Poussin portrayed a more minimal scene, with possibly the most anguished cry in the history of art. You have in front of you Breughel’s version, a picture in the possession of the Queen.¹

In line with many of Breughel’s paintings of other Biblical scenes – and in line with many of the works of his near contemporaries – Breughel has not painted Bethlehem as some fantastic oriental village. There are none of the accoutrements of the orient of the imagination. Bethlehem is not perched on a rocky outcrop in a desert landscape. There are no palm trees heavy with dates, no camels laden with spices from the east, no exotically dressed figures, no flat roofed and brightly painted stone houses reflecting the fierce sun of the Middle East. On the contrary, Bethlehem is, as you can see, an ordinary Netherlandish village of Breughel’s own time on an ordinary northern winter’s day – bright, crisp, snowy – with everyone dressed in ordinary and regular sixteenth century clothes. And Breughel rather draws attention to this translation of the events of the pre-Christian era to his own time by positioning a small but very obvious church on the horizon.

The Massacre of the Innocents has come to Flanders, and the soldiers, some on horseback and some on foot, are busy accomplishing their cruel mission. But you will probably have already noticed that the picture is not quite as Breughel intended it to be.

Before it came to the Royal Collection someone must have thought that the Massacre of the Innocents was just not the sort of thing you would want hanging in the dining room, or anywhere else for that matter, and that it needed toning down. So the doomed, dying or dead children have been painted over, concealed by a variety of other objects – though rather ineptly, so that the result is curious, bordering on the comic. In the foreground, a father is on his knees pleading for what we must take to be, I suppose, the family’s favourite goat – or is it a rather odd dog? – on whom his wife lays a protective hand.

¹ <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/405787/massacre-of-the-innocents>

Slightly to the left and further back in the scene, a woman weeps bitterly because – well, it seems that her baking hasn't turned out as she would have hoped. In the middle ground, another woman is sitting on the snow, blankly distraught with a parcel on her lap because – I am guessing wildly here – the contents have been damaged in the post. Further to the left, a family is devastated by the confiscation of their obviously much-loved pet swan. I could go on, but you see the point.

When Breughel depicted the Massacre of the Innocents as a contemporary scene in an everyday town in Flanders – and a town which even has a church in the background – he was making a rather pointed moral; so pointed, I think, that the later over-painting was almost to be expected. For what Breughel meant by transferring the massacre from the Bethlehem of Christ's time, to a small town in Flanders in his own time was surely this – that in a town not so very far from you or me, in a Christian town even, the massacre recurs.

Of course, the event to which the picture's title refers is a particular event – and notwithstanding the fact that there is no evidence for its occurrence outside Matthew's Gospel, it is only too believable. It is easy to get your Herods confused – the Herod of this story, is not the Herod who has a run-in with John the Baptist, and to whom Pilate sends Christ, in Luke's telling of the passion. The Herod of the Bethlehem story is Herod the Great, so called – and Great he was in all sorts of ways (if ever you have visited Caesarea in modern day Israel you will know he was a great builder for example). But as was famously said of Cleopatra, so of Herod, his home life was very unlike the home life of our own dear Queen – and his long reign, for all its accomplishments, was not without a darker side. Having ten wives, whatever advantages it may have had, created problems – each of those wives wanted her son or sons to succeed, and the competing ambitions led to not a little domestic unpleasantness. He had one mother-in-law imprisoned and killed and her son 'accidentally' drowned; one of his wives he had executed. So too a brother-in-law. Two ambitious sons were executed by strangulation – and another son, identified as his successor but also implicated in plotting, was executed just five days before his father. It was, one might conclude, quite unwise to be related to him, either by blood or marriage. So, with or without any confirmation from other sources, we can be sure that rumours and whispers from visiting wise men would have been sufficient to have triggered a paranoid and megalomaniac king, clinging to his power, to have ordered the massacre which Matthew's Gospel reports.

But if this is the particular story to which Breughel's painting refers, he is surely right in translating it to his contemporary locale to insist thereby that this is a story which repeats itself. The strong and powerful, jealous of their power and fearful of its loss, act ruthlessly to maintain it – even on the strength of a mere rumour, and even against the innocent.

Just this week, of course, there have been events to mark the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the various concentration camps which fell into the hands of the Allies as the Second War came to an end – including Belsen, Dachau and Auschwitz. The images from those camps are so powerful and iconic that Giotto's heap of massacred baby boys, to which I referred earlier, puts us immediately in mind of these more recent horrors.

But Breughel doesn't mean to refer us only to such dramatic echoes and amplifications of the original event. For the powerful inflict untimely death on the innocent throughout human history, not only in the great horrors which make it into history with a capital H, but also in the lesser horrors which are too frequent to get a headline. Whether directly through violence, or indirectly through the poverty and disease to which the mere selfishness of the powerful inevitably leads, the innocent die. Look up the figures for maternal mortality in Africa – you will find a contemporary version of a massacre, which happens, as Breughel's picture tells us, not just there and then, but here and now; not just once upon a time, but time and again, and even when there is a church on the horizon.

But if massacres are things which happen not only then but now, so too we might say of the action of the sometime owner of the picture who ordered the unwittingly humorous over-painting – producing as it has a town which is remarkable for the strength of the inhabitants' devotion to an unusual collection of farmyard animals. The owner had the gruesome scene over-painted. But time and again, in similar fashion, many have determined to overlook such scenes. The death of the innocent recurs says the picture; and, says the over-painting of that picture, we would prefer not to look. You hear on the BBC news sometimes: 'Look the other way now if you don't want to know the results of games to be shown later' – but we generally don't need any such encouragement to look away from the everyday deaths of the innocent.

So in the case of the remembrance of Christmas itself, we have done precisely what was done with this picture – we have painted out the unpleasantness. Our culturally favoured version of the Christmas story turns it into a lovely snowy fairy tale, which moves from atmospheric stable, with the humble shepherds and the glowing angels, on to the lavishly dressed, generous and avuncular kings, and to the mother doting on the child, without so much as a dark cloud on the horizon. And yet in the telling of the story as the Church year follows it, the Massacre of the Innocents follows hot on the heels of Christmas – three days later, to be exact, on 28 December. And two days before that, on the very first day after Christmas, there is St Stephen's day, when the Calendar asks us to recollect more unpleasantness – the stoning to death of Christianity's first martyr. Stonings and massacres; martyrs and distraught mothers; ruthless tyrants and heaped corpses – all gone from the popular version of Christmas, presumably because it would be harder to shift vast amounts of chocolate, booze and generally unwanted stocking fillers, off the back of all that.

The Christmas story, however, would not be worth a candle, let alone all the tinsel and other trimmings, if it were a story which did not encompass and address the whole of human life, including the grimy bits. If it simply overlooked them, it could be no more than a collective and socially orchestrated 'look away now', a mere escapist fantasy. But Christmas is not that – as Herod himself rightly knew.

However dodgy the intelligence dossier on which he relied, and however callous and cruel his response to it, Herod had grasped something important. He understood that Christ comes to the world not to turn a blind eye to the evil of earthly kingdoms and powers.

When Mary proclaimed at the annunciation of the conception of her son, that God hath put down the mighty from their seat, she placed the life of her son in the context of God's historic actions in seeking to establish a kingdom of justice and righteousness. There is a blues song from the 30s – I should have requested it as the anthem this evening – with the line 'I heard the voice of Jesus say: Satan your kingdom must come down.' That's what Herod heard when he heard of the one born to be king of the Jews. He got the point – and he in turn made the point, though it really didn't need making, that the mighty will not give up their seats easily, and will murderously defend them by sacrificing the lives of the innocent.

The dark bits of the Christmas story tell us that the coming of Christ, that Christmas, is about a reordering of human affairs – that, contrary to the ersatz version, Christmas does not involve God overlooking the evil of the world, but involves his addressing it. But think of that overpainting. Part of that action against evil involves converting us from being those who are ready and willing to overlook the evil of the world. For even if most of us will not be Herods, even if most of us will not be the soldiers who do his wicked bidding, we are probably all only too ready to look away now from the world's horrors, to be at best onlookers – and mere onlookers are part of the problem.

I mentioned already the anniversary of the liberation of those now infamous camps – Belsen, Dachau, and Auschwitz. You may or may not know that back in 1945, local residents from nearby villages and towns were compelled to visit the sites so recently abandoned by the SS – to walk past the tonnes of human hair, the stacks of abandoned suitcases, past the very nearly corpses of those few who had survived, past the real corpses lying on railway sidings of those who didn't make it as far as the ovens, and past the ovens where part-burnt corpses testified to what had kept those chimneys belching out their dirty smoke for all the surrounding countryside to see and smell. The film shows these visitors arriving as if for a day out; and then it shows rather chastened figures leaving the camps – ashen-faced as we might say only too appositely.

This enforced witnessing of horror was premised, as is much Holocaust remembrance, on the 'never again principle' – if we remember, if we keep these terrible events in mind, this will never happen again. Well you might say, with the incidents of genocide elsewhere in the world since 1945, that 'never again' is not going so well. But I think the fundamental thought was right – that it is really quite easy to overlook the evil of the world, and that the evil of the world will probably get along quite nicely while we do.

The Christmas story – in its complete version, not in the sanitised and cleaned up Disney edition – includes the worlds' horrors, so that we cannot overlook them – and it does so for the sake of recruiting us to the the work of Christ. That work is announced by that line from the song I have already mentioned – 'I heard the voice of Jesus say, Satan your kingdom must come down.' But the fulfilment of that work is accomplished when we once would be onlookers say Amen to that – or rather, to put it better, when we are an Amen to that voice; not when we simply say Amen, but when we become Amens to Christ's work.

Now there is finally, something about all this which Herod missed; the bit he got wrong, badly wrong, for all that he got something right. He perceived, rightly, that the one born to be king of the Jews would put him down from his seat; his mistake, having seen this, was to react in fury and rage. Sure enough Herod could not go on being the human being he was, in the kingdom Christ would establish. But had he said and been an Amen to that kingdom and not raged against it – insofar as we say and are Amens to that coming kingdom and do not ignore it – he and we would discover that far from our lives being threatened by Christ's action, they are redeemed. For our inhumanity, whether as perpetrators or over-lookers or onlookers of evil, is no humanity at all. It will become humanity, however, as we are recruited to the work of Christ, and become Amens to his kingdom.

Holy Innocents follows hot on the heels of Christmas. It is not an interruption in the celebration of the Christmas story, but a sign of its deepest implications and meaning. The coming of Christ to the world is not to sooth and comfort, but to disturb and challenge – and this challenge naturally provokes the very evil powers against which Christ comes. The massacre of the Holy Innocents occurred, and it recurs. The powerful sought, seek, and will seek again to do away with the weak and innocent. But if we do not look away, if we keep our eyes on the story, if we don't overlook it, we may become more than onlookers – we might just hear the call to join the resistance and so say and be in our lives, Amen.