

December 27, 2025 – Jeremiah 31:15-17, Revelation 14:1-5, & Matthew 2:13-23

When you think of Christmas, there are many words that come to mind. Joy. Gladness. Hope. Peace. You don't usually think of words like violence. Sadness. Fear. Grief.

It feels sacrilegious to even suggest such words. Especially while the tree is still lit, while we're still singing of angels and glad tidings. It feels awkward and inappropriate to speak of murdered children while we're still wishing one another "Merry Christmas."

And yet the Church, in her wisdom, refuses to let us pretend that Christmas is something it's not. The liturgical calendar places before us, only days after Christ's birth, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. The memorial of those children killed in Bethlehem by King Herod.

We don't do this because we delight in feeling sad or because it's wrong to feel joy. We do it because Christmas, from the very beginning, has been the celebration of something very, very dangerous. The birth of Jesus Christ is good news, but it is not harmless news. It brings peace, but not the kind of peace the world wants. And wherever Christ is, the kingdoms of this world react with fear, hostility, and violence.

Matthew tells us plainly: when Jesus is born, Herod trembles. Not because this Child raises an army. Not because He threatens rebellion. He's an infant, wrapped in cloths, utterly helpless. And yet Herod understands something that many still refuse to accept. That the presence of the true King is a threat to every single worldly king. There cannot be two ultimate authorities. There cannot be two kingdoms ruling the same heart. Ruling the same world.

Herod represents the kingdom of this fallen world: a kingdom built on fear, on control, on the preservation of power at any cost. When Herod hears that a rival king has been born, he does what the world always does. He eliminates the competition. He sheds innocent blood to preserve his throne. And this isn't an ancient problem, nor is it confined to a madman like Herod. It's a timeless sin. Wherever Christ reigns, the world resists.

Jesus, by contrast, embodies the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom of God doesn't arrive the way we expect. It comes quietly. Vulnerably. It comes in the flesh of a child who must flee in the night, carried to a faraway country by his parents.

We're often tempted to turn Christmas into an emotional escape. We want light without shadow. But Scripture insists that the light of Christmas shines into real darkness. The darkness of a sinful world. And that darkness is cruel and violent.

It lets children go hungry and die preventable deaths in the name of greed and selfishness. It kills those who are deemed unfit to live anymore and then gives it the name "euthanasia," which literally means "a good death." It even murders the unborn simply because they're unwanted and inconvenient. Are we really so different from King Herod?

The children of Bethlehem die not because of anything they did, but because of who Christ is. They die because the world can't tolerate the presence of God's King. In that sense, they're the first martyrs of the New Testament Church. They may not confess Christ with their lips, but they confess Him with their blood. They die because Christ lives.

And this is why the Church dares to remember them. And they're not the only ones during this Christmas season. Just two days ago, the Church also remembered St. Stephen, the first martyr who spoke Christ's name and was stoned for it. From the cradle onward, Christ's life is surrounded by death. Christmas flows directly into martyrdom because the birth of Christ reveals just how much the world hates the kingdom of God.

And this pattern has really never ended. The same conflict between kingdoms continues today. Christians are still killed for bearing the name of Christ. In places like Nigeria, right now, believers are murdered by ISIS simply because they belong to another King. Herod is long dead, but his kingdom of fear and violence remains.

And yet, if we stop there – if we confine the problem only to figures like Herod – then we still have not gone far enough. Because the Church doesn't confess that the world's greatest problem is simply bad rulers or cruel regimes. Scripture will not let us reduce evil to a political problem that could be solved with the right king, the right economic system, or the right social reforms. If that were the case, the world would have figured out a solution to death and suffering a long time ago.

No, the real enemy is much deeper. And Paul is quite blunt in saying it: *"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood."* Herod isn't the final adversary. He's a pawn of a much greater evil. Behind the violence, behind the fear, behind the rage against Christ, stands the ancient enemy who has hated God's purposes from the beginning. The slaughter of the innocents wasn't merely human cruelty. It was satanic opposition to the Savior.

That's something we have to recognize, because it tells us the truth about ourselves as well. We cannot defeat this enemy by simply being better people. We can't out-govern him, out-argue him, or out-wit him. Sin, death, and the devil are not problems we can manage at all. They are powers that enslave. If Christmas were only about God giving us a better example or a gentler ruler, it would not be good news at all. It would simply add another burden to people already crushed by a world they can't fix.

That's why Christ doesn't come merely to confront Herod. He comes to confront the one who stands behind Herod. He comes not just to expose injustice, but to destroy the kingdom of darkness itself. And that battle is not fought with swords or armies, it isn't purchased with gold or silver, it is bought with Christ's holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.

Which is exactly why our readings today don't leave us staring at Bethlehem's streets soaked with tears and blood. They lift our eyes to John's Revelation, showing us the Lamb standing on Mount Zion. Not hiding. Not fleeing to Egypt. Standing, alive and victorious.

Because the Lamb who once escaped Herod will one day face Pilate. The Child who was spared death in Bethlehem will later be handed over in Jerusalem. Jesus doesn't avoid the world's violence forever. He waits for His Father's timing. And then he takes every bit of hate and selfishness and sin into His own body.

He allows the kingdom of this world to do its worst to Him. Herod sheds blood to save himself. Christ sheds His own blood to save others. And in that suffering, he redeems your suffering. As Hebrews tells us, *"we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"*

Christ has felt the darkness of this world. He has suffered the darkness of hate and greed, of cruel men in powerful positions and friends who betrayed him. He has suffered the darkness of pain and grief and death. And he has shined the light of hope into that darkness. The light of grace and peace and future joy in the resurrection. Christ has redeemed the worst this world can throw at us.

So, *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* That is what the joy of Christmas is all about. It doesn't depend on everything being pleasant or peaceful. It survives sorrow because it's grounded in Christ's victory, not our circumstances. The Kingdom of God doesn't retreat in the face of suffering. It advances through the very valley of the shadow of death.

So yes, this feast feels a little uncomfortable. It should. It tells the truth. Christmas may not be quite as "merry" as we want it to be, but it is good. It is good because Christ has entered a world that kills its children and he has claimed that world as His own. It is good because the true King reigns, not by fear or force, but by mercy and sacrifice. And it is good because Herod's kingdom, in every age, always loses, for Satan's kingdom has already been deprived of its greatest weapon.

The Lamb stands. And because He stands, even the smallest victims of the world's rage are not lost, not forgotten, and not defeated. They stand around the throne of God. And we will stand with them one day. Amen.