

SERMON ON DAY OF ATONEMENT FOR WAR

Lesson: Matthew 2:13-18 - The Slaughter of the Innocents

I have read as our Second Lesson this morning a part of the story of the Epiphany. It tells of what happened after the Wise Men did not return to King Herod after their visit to bring their gifts to the Christ child - of Herod's anger, the flight of the Holy Family, and the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem by Herod's soldiers.

And I am asking you to recall this event - to which we have given a special day in the Church year - Holy Innocents Day - December 28th - in the light of the story of the massacre at My Lai which we learned of only some six weeks ago, though it occurred some 22 months ago.

Are these two stories comparable? Are the two events comparable? Some will answer "No"; for in the case of Herod's massacre, it was an act of unprovoked violence in a country which, while occupied by Roman troops, was technically at peace; while MyLai was part of a war, albeit an undeclared war, in which civilians have both participated in fighting and also given aid and comfort to the enemy.

Still, the facts seem relatively clear - several hundred civilians murdered including women and children, and only three weapons found in the entire village. One is tempted to recall the old Jewish proverb - "It makes a difference whose ox is gored." And one is tempted to wonder whether the citizens of the Song My district or the North Vietnamese will set aside March 16th as a kind of Holy Innocents Day to be observed annually for thousands of years as a remembrance of American butchery and atrocity.

But perhaps it is idle to speculate on how the North Vietnamese or the rest of the world will react to these events. Certainly our image in the eyes of many is stained and bloodied and not only because of My Lai. What is perhaps more important is

how we as Americans will react. What do the events of Bethlehem and MyLai mean to us, what effect will they have upon us, what changes will they make in us? And it is for this reason that I have asked you to join in observing a Day of Atonement, a day of repentance for our involvement in wars past and present, a day of prayers for peace.

- I. There are, it seems to me, two important attitudes which Americans commonly hold which need to be very carefully examined.
- 1). The first I might define this way: Some lives are less valuable than others and hence may be taken without a sense of guilt.
 - a. This attitude begins to affect us in our childhood. Someone has characterized the Western (movie or novel) as the typical American art form, and certainly children are exposed to it at an early age through many media. But let us examine it. Most Westerns glorify violence and killing particularly by the heroes, and most portray Indians as wild savages bent only on taking scalps. Thus the attitude - The only good Injun is a dead Injun - whether explicitly stated or merely implied, is communicated to many people who have no real knowledge of Indian people, merely the caricature presented in these stories.

The strength of this prejudice implanted young is seen in the reaction of many American adults to the case of Thomas White Hawk, an Indian young man convicted of murder and rape, and sentenced to be executed, though the best medical and psychiatric opinion judged him to be not mentally or morally responsible for the commission of these crimes. His sentence has been recently commuted to life imprisonment, but nearly 50% of the adult citizens of his home state were in favor of "letting the Injun burn".

And in a similar case in the same area, in which a white man murdered an unarmed Indian supposedly "in self-defense", there would not even have been a trial unless the Indian's widow had brought murder charges. There were no witnesses, and the jury deliberated less than two hours before acquitting the accused who now walks the streets as a free man.

b. In other sections of this country, children have been raised to believe that black people are less than human, little better than savages or animals, and the perversions of justice in these areas, the number of unpunished murderers of black men and women is too numerous to count. Jonathan Kozol, the young teacher from Boston who wrote the book DEATH AT AN EARLY AGE, speaks of the textbooks he was forced to use which implanted the prejudice of white supremacy at an age when the children were hardly old enough to read the text which accompanied the pictures,

c. And in the case of orientals - wogs, gooks, chinks, monkeys, or whatever else we have been taught to call them in the countless war movies which glut our theaters and television sets, it's all right to kill them too, because of course they aren't really human in the sense we are. And so the news networks can cheerfully announce the weekly and monthly box scores: Last week was one of the most successful weeks of the war - only 65 American dead as opposed to 2,000 of the Viet Cong. It is all said with a straight face, and yet why are we not reacting in horror? For these are human beings, children of God; But we have been conditioned to regard them as somehow less than human and thus murderable without guilt. But this is exactly what many blacks, Indians, and young people are protesting so forcefully today. And we must listen for it is not easy to change basic psychological attitudes and prejudices which have been deeply implanted in us.

It is our Christian religion which must get at these basic attitudes in us, not just play around on the surface of our lives with observances, liturgies, sewing circles, and the like. Our faith must involve us in the stuff and muck of life. You often hear it said that religion should have nothing to do with matters of politics, economic justice, etc. but should concentrate on what is vaguely termed "spiritual concerns", which usually means some kind of individual or private self-justification or self-congratulation. But here we are dealing with basic beliefs, basic issues of life and death, and their urgency is inescapable. There are NO LIVES less valuable than others which may be taken without a sense of guilt.

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The second attitude which I wish to speak of has been put most forcefully in an editorial in the issue of TIME Magazine for December 5th, 1969, and I should like to quote rather extensively from that article. Its title is "On Evil: The Inescapable Fact." (read)

II. It is these basic beliefs and attitudes that in the light of our Christian faith must be changed. And here is where we must start. What kind of a world do we want to live in? That is the urgent question which faces us. The Rev. Charles Buck, speaking in Boston last November, put it this way.

"March 16, 1968, must be set down in the annals of this country as a day of national disgrace. But it must also be recorded as a day of honor, because of the courageous action of one man, a Warrant Officer helicopter pilot named Hugh C. Thompson, who was flying a reconnaissance mission on the day of the Sonmy murders. Looking out of his helicopter, Warrant Officer Thompson saw fifteen Vietnamese children, whom the Jungle Warriors had missed, hiding

in a bunker. He landed and took them into his helicopter. A few minutes later he spotted another child, wounded but not killed, and disregarding his own safety, landed again. This time he was confronted by an officer with a rifle who ordered him at gun point to take off and leave the child. Instead of obeying the order, Warrant Officer Thompson ordered his own gunner aboard the helicopter to train his machine gun on the officer with the rifle. Then he picked up the child, put him in the helicopter, and flew him to safety.

"In that brief scene of conflict, between one man who was seeking to destroy life and another man who was seeking to save life, we are all faced with a choice. We are either on one side or the other. . . The kind of world we shall live in depends on the response we make." So-called "human decency" is and always has been capable of committing the Bethlehems and the My Lais of countless generations. It is only in Christ that we shall find the true standards of judgment by which we shall know our own evil and be able to stand in horror and repentance for what we have done and allowed to be done. But more importantly, it is only in Christ that we shall find the grace to root out and overcome our own inescapable evil and sin. Let us pray.

O God our Father, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and earth is named: Graciously behold us, thy family. Thou art ever merciful, and makest thy sun to rise on the just and on the unjust; but we have misused thy gifts, marred thy work, and robbed one another of our daily bread and even of life itself. Help us to see and feel our share in the guilt of the world, and grant us thy grace to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.