
28 DECEMBER HOLY INNOCENTS

The death of a very young child is perhaps the hardest grief of all to bear. So the 28th December is a very poignant day in the church calendar. It is when the worldwide Church joins with bereaved parents to grieve the loss of babies and young children. For Holy Innocents day recalls the massacre of the young male children of Bethlehem by Herod the Great.

Herod had been told by the magi, or wise men, that a great king had been born in Bethlehem, and he felt shaken. How could a child in unimportant little Bethlehem be so

powerful that the stars in the night sky honoured His birth?! Herod took the magi so seriously that he decided to try and kill this new young rival. He decreed that every male baby of two years and under should be killed. (Matthew 2:1-18).

Bethlehem was not a large place, and Bible commentators estimate that between six and 25 infants were slaughtered by Roman soldiers. Their mothers were inconsolable at the death of their babies, as indeed mothers have always been.

The death of these innocent baby boys of Bethlehem became a feast-day in the western Church by the 4th century. This was because the Church

considered them to be martyrs because they not only died *for Christ, but instead of Christ.*

Down the centuries, the tragic loss of the Holy Innocents has touched the imagination and hearts of poets, preachers and artists. Though heart-broken parents still grieve today, the

Church can offer them one firm assurance: that young children who die to this world will undoubtedly “this day be with Me in Paradise.” The One who eagerly said “Suffer the little children to *come unto Me*” will be the last person to turn them away.

