

The story of the Holy Innocents is found in the Gospel according to Matthew, and it is the story of an atrocity.

Herod the Great was titled "king of the Jews," but he held his throne at the pleasure of the Roman emperor. The precariousness of his power made him all the more ruthless in defending it. Thus, when he learned that the Christ, the true king of the Jews, had been born at Bethlehem, Herod wanted to do away with him. But he did not know the exact identity of the child, so he sent his troops to slaughter all the infants of Bethlehem on the chance that one of the victims would be the Christ-child.

The murdered infants never had an opportunity to know Jesus or to confess him in their own right. But they all died for the sake of Christ, and Herod's atrocity sealed the name of Christ on each one of them. The Holy Innocents are therefore considered the prototype of all Christian martyrs.

The Holy Innocents may also be considered the patron saints of our own age. For we live in an age of atrocities, in a time infamous for the slaughter of innocent bystanders who never chose the causes for which they have been made to die. By celebrating this feast, we perform an office for the Holy Innocents and all other victims of massacre. We become their voice and cry out for God to remember the slaughtered — and to remember them for the sake of Christ, himself the great Innocent who was crucified by "the rulers of this age."

*See Readings, page 399.*

**Sentence**

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *Matthew 5.10*

**Collect**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, whose children suffered at the hands of Herod, receive, we pray, all innocent victims into the arms of your mercy. By your great might frustrate all evil designs and establish your reign of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Readings**

Jeremiah 31.15-17 *or* Revelation 21.1-7      Psalm 124

*Refrain* We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler. *Or n. 7 or CR 5*  
Matthew 2.13-18

**Prayer over the Gifts**

Merciful God,  
accept all we offer you this day.  
Preserve your people from cruelty  
and indifference to violence,  
that the weak may always be defended  
from the tyranny of the strong.  
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Preface of a Martyr*

**Prayer after Communion**

Eternal God,  
comfort of the afflicted and healer of the broken,  
you have fed us this day at the table of life and hope.  
Teach us the ways of gentleness and peace,  
that all the world may acknowledge  
the kingdom of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.