



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells
Cathedral, preached on Sunday 28 December
2025 by the Reverend Prebendary Narinder
Tegally, Priest Vicar**

Holy Innocents – Looking Beyond Ourselves

The joy of Christmas - the carols we have sung, attending concerts in beautiful settings, meeting with family and friends, the exchanging of gifts and of course too much food - may be quickly fading as today's Gospel reminds us that the story of Christ's birth is not wrapped only in tenderness and light—it is pierced by shadows of fear and violence.

The peace of the manger is overshadowed by the pain of Herod's cruelty. From the very beginning, Jesus enters a world torn by cruelty - a world not unlike ours, longing desperately and in need of healing, peace and reconciliation.

The feast of the Holy Innocents confronts us with this truth. Herod feels threatened, and the Holy Family flees under cover of night. Vulnerability, not power, becomes God's chosen way to redeem the world. It is unsettling, yet it is part of our story. And it speaks with piercing relevance to our world today.

Herod responds to the birth of Jesus not with the wonder of the shepherds and wise men, but with fear which is rooted in anxiety that he will lose power and control. His power feels threatened, and fear quickly turns to violence.

Rather than welcoming new life, a baby born to be king, Herod, himself an illegitimate ruler who had conspired to seize power, seeks to destroy Jesus. His soldiers miss Jesus who has escaped to Egypt, and it is the smallest, the weakest, and the voiceless who pay the price.

This is a story of intrigue and fear, of hasty escape and brutal violence, of innocent lives lost. The children of Bethlehem die not because of wrongdoing, but simply because they are there - small, defenceless, and vulnerable.

As we honour these Holy Innocents, we are called to look honestly at our own world: where fear still breeds violence, where comfort blinds us to suffering, and where God calls us to live with courage and compassion.

From the very start, Matthew's Gospel confronts us with an uncomfortable truth: where we will always be called to live holy lives and be counter-cultural. He gives us new life by His Spirit and invites us to see through His eyes - a world where evil is rife, where the comfort of some is sustained by the suffering of others - and to ask where we stand within that reality.

We often romanticise the birth of Jesus and the Holy Family. Yet Matthew presents them as a family under threat - forced to flee in the darkness, displaced and dependent on the mercy of strangers. The Son of God enters history not in security or privilege, but at the margins, in vulnerability and trust.

For many of us here, family life often means stability, choice, and safety. But the story of Jesus' birth reminds us that for countless families across the world, life is marked by fear, loss, and forced displacement.

We only need to think of Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Nigeria, Cambodia, Thailand - and so many other places where many are suffering terribly today. The Christmas story will not let us imagine faith as something detached from the harsh realities faced by others.

Our hearts ache for the suffering of children across the globe, and especially in Gaza this year, and the call of Christ to us to do something, albeit small about it because it offends the one who created us in his image – the one who calls us by name and dwells within us.

As we look at the current conflict in the Middle East, we see that the Hamas attack on October 6th was terrible. We are deeply shocked and rightly condemn it, but we are equally shocked by the deaths and injuries in Gaza which have happened as a result of the Military response and the lack of intervention from the wider world.

Thousands and thousands of children have died; many more have suffered life changing injuries, both physical and mental. Many more have lost parents and family members and are alone in the world.

Today, in the heart of Bath, names of all innocent children will be read aloud during a '*Vigil of the Innocents*'. Wherever you are, I invite you to pause - to pray, or to light a candle - for every child whose life has been lost in our world.

Matthew quotes the prophet Jeremiah: "*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children.*" That cry echoes through history - and into our present. We hear it in the news, on social media, and in the stories of families torn apart by war and injustice. Rachel's cry is the sound of grief that refuses to be silenced.

Yet so often, we remain distant and become anaesthetised. Comfort can dull our compassion. The danger is not cruelty, but indifference - distance from suffering, from injustice, and from lives so different from our own.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents challenges us to listen and to ask:

Whose suffering do we not hear? Which families remain invisible to us?

How often do we assume our experience is the norm?

And what is God calling us to do to bring the light and love of Christ into a suffering world?

I am reminded of my own family. My father came to this country from India in the 1960s - a proud Sikh, full of hope for a better life. But his journey was not easy. To provide for his family, he felt compelled to erase visible signs of his identity by cutting his hair, removing his turban - so that he could be accepted. It was a sacrifice born of necessity, not choice, it was also a moment of deep loss, but also of resilience.

He endured racism, exclusion, and humiliation. Yet he never allowed bitterness to take root. Instead, his life was shaped by an unshakable commitment to justice, equality, and peace- not only for himself, but for generations to come. He believed dignity is not something society grants; it is a truth we must claim and defend - quietly, persistently, and with unwavering integrity.

In his late 60s, my father suffered a stroke which left him vulnerable and lost – he allowed me to pray with him and anoint and over time he rediscovered his faith and, with it, his identity. He grew his hair again and placed his turban on his head with pride, reclaiming what had been taken away from him. It was a quiet, powerful reconciliation with his identity and beliefs.

My father's story helps me understand the Holy Family: like Joseph, he made decisions shaped by love and responsibility rather than comfort. Like many families today, he navigated systems that demanded adaptation without offering full acceptance.

Belonging is often costly; displacement is never a failure of faith. It is the very place where God meets us in our vulnerability and gives us courage. Herod's story exposes the misuse of power. In our own day, injustice often works quietly - through systems and attitudes that protect privilege while leaving others vulnerable. We may not act like Herod, yet we can still benefit from structures that harm others.

Justice is more than good intentions. It asks us to look honestly at how we live, how we speak, and how we welcome. Compassion is not only about giving; it is about standing alongside those whose lives are marked by fear and uncertainty.

So, when families are displaced, the question is not only whether we feel sympathy, but whether we will make space - in our hearts, in our communities, and in practical ways.

A cathedral is a place of worship, but it is also a public witness. It stands at the heart of a city, not as a symbol of separation, but as a sign of God's concern for the whole world.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents calls us to become a community that looks beyond itself into shared responsibility:

- Beyond our own families to the global human family
- Beyond comfort to costly compassion
- Beyond charity to courageous justice

To honour the Holy Innocents is to let their memory shape how we live - how we welcome the stranger, protect children, and use our influence for good. God came as a vulnerable child, entrusted not to the powerful, but to those willing to listen, act, and care.

May this feast disturb us just enough to change us - opening our eyes to suffering **we would rather not see** and softening our hearts to **those we do not yet know**.

Soon we will gather at the Lord's Table ----**here, all are welcome** - not because we are perfect, but because Christ meets us where we are in our need today and every day in our vulnerability.

This table is not a private meal; it is a sign of God's love and hospitality for the whole world. As we receive bread and wine, may we also receive the call to become bread for others - to offer nourishment, welcome, and hope to those who hunger for belonging.

Christ is our light. The darkness will not overcome him. Christ is our peace. His love is wider than our divisions. Christ is our hope. He is near to the vulnerable and the weary. **Amen**

The Reverend Prebendary Narinder Tegally DL, Priest Vicar

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