BREAKING OPEN

Scripture Study

The Holy Innocents?

We need to talk…

DECEMBER 28TH, 2025

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A weekly reflection based on the teachings at St Peter's by the Lake, Paynesville, together with a study guide based on the readings, some liturgical resources RCL Lectionary, and a weekly devotion

Revised Common Lectionary Related

The Holy Innocents

Jeremiah 31.15-17

Psalm 124

1 Corinthians 1.26-29

Matthew 2.13-18

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Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collects

O Almighty God,
who out of the mouths of babes
and sucklings hast ordained
strength, and madest infants to glorify
thee by their deaths:
Mortify and kill all vices in us,
and so strengthen us by thy grace,
that by the innocency of our lives,
and constancy of our faith,
even unto death, we may glorify thy holy
Name: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION

This reflection is basically a essay, and asks some very tough questions.

In context, in Australia, there is a perceived difficulty in trying to force a 'Royal Commission' into the problems of anti-Semitism and violence towards various groups within the community.

A Royal Commission that embraces race, religion, freedom of speech, and antisemitism can:

tell the truth where debate has become distorted

protect freedoms while naming real harm

dignify vulnerable communities without absolutism

restore trust in institutions

and help a society learn how to disagree without dehumanising

It cannot solve everything. But it can set the moral and legal compass—and sometimes, in a fractured public square, that is precisely what is needed.

Anglican Perspective on Free Speech and Human Dignity (Short Statement) (created with AI)

From an Anglican perspective, human dignity is God-given, grounded in the belief that every person is created in the image of God. Because dignity is inherent, speech that dehumanises, incites hatred, or erodes the worth of others is morally serious, even when it is legally permitted.

Free speech is valued as essential for truth-seeking, conscience, and prophetic witness, but it is not an absolute licence. Words are powerful and formative; they can heal or harm, build community or fracture it. Anglican theology therefore understands free speech as a responsibility ordered toward truth, neighbour-love, and the common good.

Criticism, debate, and disagreement are not threats to dignity. Falsehood, distortion, and speech that legitimises fear or violence are. Particular care is required where speech intersects with historic prejudice, including antisemitism, whose effects are deep, cumulative, and often disguised.

Freedom, in Anglican thought, is relational rather than individualistic. It exists to enable shared flourishing, not to undermine it. Speech is most faithful when it is truthful, restrained, and attentive to its impact on others—truth spoken in love, for the sake of justice and peace.

As we walk lightly on sacred ground,
teach us Lord to make known your kingdom,
and let this reflect in all that we do and say.

The Holy Innocents

We need to talk

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The Holy Innocents?

Reflecting on the Sundays of Christmas offers an opportunity to connect more deeply with our congregation's present spiritual needs. The Feast of the Holy Family holds particular significance for me—not only as a cherished memory from my early ministry at Holy Trinity in Launceston, but also as a meaningful point of reflection for us today. In that small parish, with its modest out-centre dedicated to the Holy Family, the rhythm of the season was simple: Christ Mass, Holy Family, Epiphany, Epiphany-tide, and finally Candlemas.

The story unfolded step by step, as if it could not be hurried. Through such reflection, we gain clearer perspective and discover fresh relevance for our own journey. I invite you to recall your own meaningful Christmas memories or traditions—cherished family gatherings, special hymns, or the warmth of shared meals that still resonate with you. As you remember these personal moments, consider how they enrich your spiritual life today and draw you more deeply into the broader message of the season.

Lately, however, I find myself pausing at the readings for 28 December—the day of the Holy Innocents. I have never shied away from complex texts, yet when the Sunday after Christmas confronts us with the sorrow of Bethlehem, the story no longer feels safe. We are accustomed to nativity scenes that are gentle, familiar, and comforting. But the gospel does not let us remain there.

Now, thirty years on from those early days in the Tamar Valley, I am less willing to smooth over the sharp edges of the story. The Incarnation is not comfortable. Matthew's Gospel offers little

solace. Our liturgies often blend Matthew and Luke, weaving prophecy and fulfilment, but something deeper calls. I find myself asking: do we dare to enter the story as it is, not as we wish it to be? Not the soft glow of a perfect nativity, but the rawness of "God with us."

Consider, for instance, the political tyranny of Herod, whose actions led to the massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem. This reminds us that divine presence does not negate human suffering. Instead, it underscores the vulnerability and peril inherent in the Incarnation: the divine chooses to enter a world rife with danger and despair. Yet, even amidst this darkness, we are reminded of the enduring light of hope that comes with God's presence. The story of the Incarnation encourages us to find God's love and resilience amid turmoil, offering comfort and strength to face our world's challenges with faith and courage.

On the roster for this Sunday is a newly minted Lay Reader, and her first-ever sermon to the parish will be on "The Holy Innocents." A mix of anticipation and nerves has marked her journey to this moment, as she steps into a role filled with responsibility. The weight of preaching on such a complex topic is not lost on her, and the stakes feel high. She has spoken of the challenge of addressing themes of innocence lost and harsh realities in Scripture, especially when the world outside mirrors those sombre themes. Her courage shines in her willingness to embrace such demanding subject matter, fully aware of the emotional and intellectual effort it requires.

We should acknowledge her dedication and bravery in tackling such a poignant subject for her first sermon. I invite the congregation to support and encourage her as she leads us in reflecting on this powerful narrative. If we recall the brilliant scriptwriting of Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn in the much-loved series Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister, my only response to my Lay Reader (authorised non-ordained ministry with authority to lead worship and preach) would be, "...very courageous, Minister!" In the series, Sir Humphrey Appleby uses that line to discourage the Minister from pursuing an action that, while correct and appropriate, will lead to uncomfortable political consequences.

So, what sort of consequences could be uncomfortable for my courageous minister?

When dealing with a topic as sensitive as the genocide of Jewish

children in a town beyond the Western Wall, in what is now understood as Palestinian territory, caution is immediately required in light of our present situation. The state of Victoria has stringent laws regarding religious commentary and vilification (Racial and Religious Vilification, 2024). At a time when Australia is still reeling from the events at Bondi Beach, Sydney, on the first night of Hanukkah, the lines are challenging to navigate (Australian state plans stricter laws against displaying extremist flags after Bondi shooting, 2025).

Her courage lies in making the point that this area of the world is no stranger to terrorism and horrific violence, both within and beyond the walls of Jerusalem. To read the text in this way is not to employ an anti-Semitic trope, but to make an observation grounded in scriptural and historical sources.

My intention is not to disparage, but to engage honestly with the complexity of history. Affirming the dignity and resilience of the Jewish people is fundamental; our reflections must foster understanding rather than divisiveness.

To guard against any anti-Semitic interpretations, we emphasise that our approach is one of respect and dialogue, acknowledging the Jewish roots of Christian Scripture while promoting reconciliation and mutual understanding. Our exploration of the text must remain sensitive and responsible. To use the passage simply to make a present-day political point based on history would itself be "very courageous"—and it is further complicated by the nature of Matthew's text.

According to Jewish Awareness Ministries, Matthew's genealogy is not primarily intended to establish Jesus' royal descent from the house of David, but rather to demonstrate that Jesus could not be king if he were truly Joseph's biological son (pp. 11, 31). Comparing the genealogy in Luke's Gospel with that in Matthew creates further questions. Yet it could also be argued that Matthew is establishing historical precedent to support claims made within the text.

Jeffrey R. Chadwick, for example, notes that evidence such as the lunar eclipse of 13 March 4 B.C.E.—which occurred shortly before Passover and matches Josephus's account—supports the idea that Herod died in 4 B.C.E. As a result, some events attributed to Herod become problematic when reconsidered alongside these sources, suggesting the need for a more careful and systematic approach.

Fr Daniel Harrington SJ recognises such complexities in the Sacra Pagina series (The Gospel of Matthew). He writes that "the focus of the work is on Matthew as a Jewish text—Jewish in its conceptual and rhetorical assumptions, in its sociological setting, and in its theological message. The approach is literary, historical, and theological.

There are, however, important matters that get little attention: the concerns of the new literary methods (reader response criticism, structuralism, semiotics), and the history of the Gospel."

A reader-response perspective might suggest that interpretation of the suffering of the Holy Innocents in Matthew can shift significantly depending on a reader's own experience of injustice or loss. This method encourages us to consider how contemporary readers relate these ancient stories to their own lives, thereby deepening their engagement with the text.

Addressing the charge of anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic tendencies in Matthew's Gospel, Harrington observes: "Calling Matthew anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic is a harsh verdict. Yet this conclusion has been drawn by Jewish and Christian scholars who have studied the matter seriously." While this perspective highlights the risks inherent in Matthew's text, the Gospel also contains a genuine potential for reconciliation, offering an avenue for deepened Christian–Jewish dialogue. By holding together both peril and promise, we can foster more constructive engagement with Matthew.

Encouraging further scholarship and openness to exploring the text with historical, theological, and pastoral sensitivity, Harrington continues:

"For those concerned with Christian–Jewish relations today, the serious study of Matthew's Gospel is necessary. Matthew reminds us of the need for historical study to appreciate the message of a NT writing. Without attention to its historical setting, Matthew becomes a dangerous text, capable of encouraging anti-Semites. Historical study of Matthew enables us to see the thrust of his historical project of rooting Jesus in the Jewish tradition. It also gives a context for the admittedly polemical and harsh judgments raised against his Jewish opponents.

For Matthew, Jesus' fulfilment of the Scriptures did not mean that those Scriptures had lost their significance and therefore could be disregarded. Rather, for Matthew, the Hebrew Scriptures gained significance through Jesus and continue to be part of the 'treasure' of the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven (see Matt 13:52)."

Our pastoral goal, then, must be clear: to foster lament, solidarity, and moral vigilance. Our reflections should help the congregation to process grief, stand firmly with those who suffer, and remain morally alert to the complexities of history and their impact on present realities. This approach allows us to bridge the ancient narrative and today's challenges without losing sight of the compassion and critical reflection these times demand.

To facilitate this journey, our congregation could take several concrete actions. We might:

- hold regular prayer sessions focused on lament and solidarity, creating space for communal healing and reflection;
- organise outreach programs to support suffering communities, strengthening our commitment to stand with those in need; and
- offer educational workshops or talks—perhaps in collaboration with interfaith partners—to deepen understanding of Scripture, history, and current events.

These steps would empower our community to respond meaningfully to both historical and contemporary issues, reinforcing our moral vigilance.

Further reflections on the texts for the day invite us to examine aspects of the story that also form the foundations for the Passion and Resurrection. The visit of the Magi in Matthew 2 contains vital prophetic fulfilment in Matthew's narrative. Presumably from the East, perhaps Persia, having "seen his star at its rising," they come in search of the "King of the Jews."

According to Britannica, Herod the Great was not born with the title "King of the Jews" but was of Arab origin and became a practising Jew before being appointed to the role by the Romans. At the same time, rumours were spreading about a star heralding the birth of a true king. Fearful whispers suggested that Herod had decreed that anyone found discussing this new ruler would face severe punishment.

The search for one born King of the Jews would certainly have disturbed the house of Herod. He was not born to the throne; he was appointed. After his death, Rome appointed tetrarchs—four of Herod's descendants—to rule across Judea. The idea of a king "born to be king" posed an immediate threat to Herod, especially if this hope was widespread among the people.

It would also be easy to criticise the Magi for practising the outlawed art of astrology, as noted in Deuteronomy 18:10–14. This stands in sharp contrast to Isaiah 47:13–14, where God mocks the astrologers of Babylon for their inability to predict the future. This juxtaposition highlights an intriguing irony: Matthew includes astrologers—figures often dismissed in Jewish texts—to herald the arrival of the King of the Jews.

Herod's response is not to embrace the Magi's divination but to react to the possibility that there truly is one who is rightfully fit for the throne by birthright.

Legitimacy is fundamental to both people and nationhood. In the reign of one of Herod's descendants, the very title "King of the Jews" would be written on the sign placed above the adult Jesus at his crucifixion. The Sanhedrin and Herod's court objected to Pilate's inscription and sought to have it changed to "This man claimed to be King of the Jews." Pilate refused: Quod scripsi, scripsi (John 19:22).

The flight to Egypt, like many parts of Matthew 2, appears reminiscent of midrash—Jewish interpretive storytelling that explains, expands, or fills in details about biblical narratives and helps shape traditional and modern Jewish understanding. Matthew draws on prophetic verses associated with Moses—"out of Egypt"—and places Jesus firmly in an insignificant northern town, Nazareth. Much of this is not corroborated by Matthew's contemporaries (for example, Josephus). As in midrash, creativity and imaginative narrative are not unusual.

Another often-repeated conjecture is that the gifts of the Magi, particularly the gold, were used by the Holy Family to fund their journey into Egypt and later aspects of Jesus' life. While this became a familiar trope in the Middle Ages and in some mystery plays, it lacks biblical or historical proof. At first glance, it seems

an enduring tradition, yet it downplays the spiritual meaning of the gifts.

John Chrysostom, in Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew (Homily 7), writes:

"The gold was given to a king... the frankincense to God... the myrrh to one who was to die for the world. But observe also the wisdom of the Magi: they bring not only gold, but frankincense and myrrh, that neither should Joseph be troubled at the sight of the gold, nor the unseasonable wealth injure the Child."

Augustine, in Sermon 202, also interprets the gifts symbolically, but does not discuss their practical use. However, in another sermon (Sermon 204), he says:

"It is reasonable to suppose that these gifts, being so valuable, were not left unused, but rather were helpful to the family in their need" and "The poverty of Christ was not lessened by these gifts, for they were quickly spent or distributed to the poor" (Sermon 204.3).

Chrysostom does not say the gold paid for the journey, only that the gifts had meaning beyond their worth. The earliest voices after Matthew speak of kingship, divinity, and suffering. The story is not about wealth, but about what these gifts reveal.

According to Fr Joe's Homilies, whatever significance the gold may have had, it does not change the essential story that the Holy Family remained poor, and the idea of imagined wealth does not alter the core message.

So, who will stay with the story of the Holy Innocents? Who will choose the more challenging path rather than the comfort of a nativity scene, gentle and untroubled, where even the child does not cry?

In a time when some in our community are attacked simply for being who they are, to choose comfort over truth would be to turn away.

There are calls for a Royal Commission into antisemitism. It may give us a record of what has always been. But real change comes only when we are honest, when we name what is before us. The story of the Holy Innocents reminds me how easily a narrative can

be shaped, layer upon layer, until we are left with Pilate's question: "What is truth?"

As a concrete step towards facing this truth, our congregation could enter a period of public lament and reflection. This might include an interfaith dialogue series bringing together members of different faith communities to explore how narratives have shaped—and been shaped by—religious texts, especially around themes of truth and reconciliation. Such a series could open pathways to understanding and healing, encouraging us to confront these complex topics openly.

It is vital to invite and encourage participation from all parishioners, including those who may feel hesitant or marginalised. By fostering an inclusive environment, we create a sense of belonging and shared purpose, ensuring that every voice contributes to our collective journey of reconciliation and understanding.

Perhaps the answer lies in challenging Pilate's distance—his refusal to enter the dispute. We are called to face the truth, however uncomfortable, however fragile it seems in our world.

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End notes and further reading

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Primary Text for the immediate future!

Harrington, Daniel J Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew

Brabarlung Totem

This is produced on GunaiKurnai Country and our respects are made to the First Nations people everywhere.

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