

28th December 2020

Innocence

“The innocents abroad.”

Mark Twain, The title of one of his books (1869)

When I was a young minister, I worked in a local youth club where one of the young leaders had an artificial leg. He'd had a leg amputated when he was five years old following an accident with a delivery van. Of all the team, he was the one who had the most natural empathy with the kids. I once asked him why. He reckoned that because he'd lost his innocence at such a young age, he understood something of the struggles the children were experiencing in a tough environment of poverty and deprivation.

Today, the Church traditionally marks “The Feast of the Holy Innocents”, focussing on the part of the Christmas narrative in Matthew's Gospel of the “flight into Egypt”, after a fearful King Herod orders the slaughter of innocent children as an attempt to get rid of Jesus. And on this day, I invite you to think about Mark Twain's “innocents abroad”, all those children whose innocence is endangered by current circumstances.

Following the Bali bombing in 2002, John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, called on all right-minded people to reflect on the loss of life. “I want them,” he said, “to reflect on what it means in terms of the loss of innocence.” I ask you as right-minded people to reflect on what it means for our children to have their innocence threatened: by poverty, fear, gun-crime, social circumstances, cut-backs, abuse, lack of opportunity. As the football player, Marcus Rashford, reminds us, we all have a responsibility to help create a society in which threats to our children's welfare are a thing of the past, and in which “innocents abroad” have the best chance to grow into their full adult potential.

In 1854, the French composer, Hector Berlioz, wrote an Oratorio entitled *L'enfance du Christ* (The Childhood of Christ), penning his own words round the story of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt. The innocent childhood of Jesus was precious. On this Holy Innocents' Day, might the innocence of every child be seen as equally precious to us all?

A prayer for today

*Lord, we as your children are always precious.
We pray that all your children will be precious in our eyes too. Amen*

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon
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