



At the end of a year there is an inevitable review of what has happened. New Year's Eve is the opportunity to look back before we anticipate what is to come. Given the state of the world, there

is a very sombre review of the horrors that so many people are facing in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and so many troubled areas.

We are just past the half way point of the twelve days of Christmas and in the liturgical calendar we have marked several feast days: St. Stephen, St. John the Evangelist, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, and the commemoration of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was martyred in his own cathedral in 1170.

All of these days mark some level of atrocity that doesn't feel very Christmasy. But what particularly gets me is the Feast of the Holy Innocents: that day when King Herod ordered the murder of all children under two years old in Bethlehem and the surrounding region. Herod was ruthless in defending the precariousness of his position, so when he heard that Christ had been born "King of the Jews" he issued this decree in the hopes that the Christ child would be killed and his power would be preserved.

The Holy Innocents are considered a prototype of all Christian martyrs and the patron saints of our own age. For we live in an age of atrocities where innocent bystanders become victims of the causes they never choose. By acknowledging this feast we become the voice of all victims of genocide and we remember them for the sake of Christ who was the great Innocent killed by the rulers of the age.

Celebrating these feast days doesn't feel very Christmasy, but it reminds us that the Christ child was born into a world much like we are living in today: with all of it's uncertainties, and the appalling propensity that we all possess towards acts of violence to preserve our own positions of power.

It is in this context that we hear of Simeon and Anna: those two faithful figures who all of their lives had served in the temple, offered their prayers, and quietly lived out a life of faith and devotion.

This event is known as the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and is often celebrated 40 days after Christmas - sometimes known as the Feast of Light, or Candlemas.

When they saw the Christ child being presented in the customary way in the temple, and Mary and Joseph presenting a pair of turtle doves and two pigeons - a sacrifice that indicates they were probably quite poor -

Simeon and Anna were fixed on this child and confessed him to be the Messiah.

Simeon's words have become a great canticle of the church known as the *Nunc Dimittis* - "Lord, let now thy servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen thy salvation."

Simeon feels that he could now die in peace because he, like the shepherds, was given the privilege of *seeing* the Messiah. This child, he said, would be the light of the gentiles. This is good news that the world is brought in to the household of faith, and like Jacob who was not entitled to receive a blessing, we would also inherit the promise given to Abraham, not by deceit like it was for Jacob, but by grace. This is where we confess the "catholicity" of the faith - that this gift is *for* the world.

But Simeon doesn't stop there. He goes on to say that this child would also be a sign to be opposed and be the vehicle to reveal the the inner thoughts of many. This changes things.

We say that when things are brought into the light, then all will be revealed. Sometimes we would rather hide things. When God looked for Adam and Eve in the garden they hid themselves out of shame. King David hid himself; Peter turned his face in shame and said, "I do not know him." We all have a propensity to cover up those things that we are ashamed of.

But if the Messiah is about bringing us all in, and about being the light, then things get revealed that we would rather stay covered up. We feel uncomfortable about making them known.

This is what we hear on the seventh day of Christmas, the first Sunday after Christmas.

Light has come into the world and there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed.

So, we might as well just get it out of our system. In our liturgies, there is always an invitation to confess our sin. And we do it together. No one is left out. It is an invitation to do a sombre review and a cleansing of the soul.

So as we review our lives, and our past year, on the eve of beginning a New Year, unburden yourself, so that in the light of God's grace you may know the freedom of being delivered from shame and clothed in the garments of salvation. Isaiah promises that you will be given a new name; you will be a beautiful crown in the hand of the Lord and a royal diadem in the hand of God. From beginning to end this is the work of God that we have received as a gift. In receiving that gift for a New Year, as Isaiah says, may you be blessed to know that "your whole being will greatly rejoice in God."