

12.28.2025 The Holy Innocents (Matthew 2:13-18)

Nearly four months ago, Charlie Kirk was assassinated while dialoguing with college students on a campus in Utah. In the days following his death, there were numerous reports of a great spiritual movement taking place. Many people believed this tragedy might be a turning point for our country, and now, several months later, according to a Barna survey that was just released “the data reveals his killing has sparked a wave of reflection and action, particularly among the younger generations he worked to reach and among practicing Christians.”

Barna surveyed 5,000 adults, and found that one in four of all Americans said they’ve taken spiritual action as a result of Charlie’s death, and among practicing Christians that number goes up to 40 percent - nearly half of us have taken spiritual action because of his death. The survey also revealed that half of all Americans, and 71 percent of practicing Christians, believe Charlie’s death will have a positive impact on Christianity among younger Americans.

As you know, it’s extremely rare, a person might even say it’s unheard of, to read such encouraging news about Christianity in our culture, but do you feel like celebrating? This positive effect came after a horrific evil. Charlie’s wife is now a widow, his children will grow up without their father, and even when we try to set our sights higher than this earth, and look at these things from a heavenly, eternal perspective, it’s difficult to process. We know that God doesn’t cause evil, but at times even the thought that God, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and present everywhere would allow such evil can lead us to question His ways. The words spoken by God through Isaiah are certainly true. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways (Isaiah 55:8). From our finite, limited perspective there is so much we’d choose to accomplish in a different way, but perhaps the feast we celebrate this morning can help us gain a more God-like perspective.

The feast of the Holy Innocents is one of the oldest liturgical feasts marked on the Church calendar. It’s been celebrated for over 1600 years, and this feast, as we learned in our Gospel lesson today, came after a horrific evil. The feast we celebrate this morning honors the innocent boys in Bethlehem who

were killed by Herod when he realized that he'd been outsmarted by the Magi. St. Matthew described it this way: *"Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more"* (Matthew 2:16-18).

It's nearly impossible to imagine the horror in Bethlehem, and the unthinkable grief experienced by the parents, as soldiers carried out Herod's order to kill these innocent children, and yet from the early days of the Church this tragedy has been commemorated in a triumphant way with a feast. You'll remember that over the last four weeks, through the penitential season of Advent, we haven't sung the Gloria, but this Sunday morning we celebrate with the Gloria the feast of the Holy Innocents. We sing, *Glory be to God on high*, in this liturgical feast because these innocent children are recognized by the Church as saints and martyrs who are now in the presence of God - beholding Him face to face.

These boys are venerated by the Church universally as saints and martyrs because they not only died for Christ, they literally died in His place. You see, Herod thought that by killing every boy in Bethlehem that was two or younger, he would certainly kill the newborn King, but these children died in His place as the Christ Child escaped Herod's wrath when the Holy Family fled into Egypt. These boys died for Christ, and years later on the Cross at Calvary, He would die for them, opening up to them, and to us, the gates of larger life and the glory of heaven.

We celebrate this feast today, singing *Glory be to God on high* for good reason. We celebrate because, though they were young and unaware, these innocent children completely fulfilled the purpose of the Christian life, which is, to die for Christ - the One who died for you. Today we celebrate their attainment of that goal, and in our own way strive to follow their example as we, in this life, choose to die daily for Christ. Jesus said, *"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for My sake will find it"*

(Matthew 10:39). In other words, the person who selfishly pursues security and comfort and their own life in this world will lose the larger life that Christ offers us, and the one who loses their life for His sake by denying themselves, taking up their own instrument of death, their own cross daily, and following Christ no matter the cost will find in Him true life - life abundant, and life eternal (Luke 9:23; John 10:10).

The purpose of the Christian life is to die for Christ, as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” We may never be called to physical martyrdom, but we are called to die, to present our selves, our souls and bodies “*as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*” (Romans 12:1), a living sacrifice, a daily death to sin and selfish desires. We’re called to die to sin, and in his first epistle St. Peter tells us that our Lord’s death on the Cross made such a death to sin possible. Peter tells us that Christ Himself “*bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*” (1 Peter 2:24). We’re called to die to selfish desires. Again, St. Peter tells us that if you’ve died to sin, “*you won’t spend the rest of your lives chasing your own desires, but you will be anxious to do the will of God*” (1 Peter 4:2 NLT).

For over 1600 years the Church, in its wisdom, has celebrated the Holy Innocents with a Gloria. Glory be to God on high, because these children fulfilled the purpose of this transitory, fleeting mortal life - they died for the One who died for them, or to use a thought from Philip Henry, they gave up what they could not keep to gain what they could not lose. Now it’s our turn to follow their example, and give up what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose. It’s time to give glory to God by dying daily for the One who died for us. By the grace of God may we do so, may we die to sin and to selfish desires, because it is only when we die that we can truly live.