



The Massacre of the Innocents: Léon Cogniet, 1824

'... Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted'

Matthew 2.18

The speed with which the calendar catapults us from the glory of God in a manger to the state-authorised slaughter of scores of little boys is always shocking (Mt 2. 7-18). But the world in which God takes flesh, was and is a world of families on the run, a world where the weeping of mothers doesn't win mercy for their children.

You can smell the fear in this painting. Cogniet has divided it in two with the jagged wall of some sort of ruin. On the left, a barefooted woman who's had no time to do more than scoop up a child in each arm, takes desperate flight. One of Herod's soldiers, brandishing a dagger, is in hot pursuit. Behind him, at the top of the steps, it's already too late and screams ricochet under the arch. Wide-eyed with terror, a woman muzzling her son's mouth, looks out at us from the painting's other half. "What are you going to do?" she asks. "You may not be able to do anything for *me*, but what are you

going to do for women *like* me in your own time who cannot protect their children from the abuse of power? In Yemen and Syria, for example? At the US/Mexican border? And indeed, in modern-day Bethlehem?" Rachel still weeps inconsolably for her children.

Pre-warned in a dream to flee, the Holy Family has already left for Egypt. They have escaped brutal murder but now face the timeless challenges of the refugee. Everything about this first-century event brings us face to face with the full pain of human suffering.

Pandemic has opened a new window onto this pain and offered us a chance to recalibrate, to re-set our frame of reference. As Pope Francis says, "We cannot let the current clarifying moment pass us by... If we are to emerge from Covid less selfish than before, we must let ourselves be touched by others' pain".

"How can God allow this and all the massacres that darken the pages of history? Jesus gives no answer. What he does is come into the world and suffer with us."

Sr Wendy Beckett

Prayer

Re-shape our vision, O God, that we too may not be comforted until the tyrant's power is no more and the tears of the powerless are dried. Amen