

---

## Liturgy and reflection resources for Holy Innocents Day

### Some background note on Holy Innocents' Day

On 28 December, Christians mark 'Holy Innocents' Day'. On this day, according to one of the Christian Gospels, King Herod sought to secure his power by ordering the deaths of all the infants in and around Bethlehem.

For some years, this day has been chosen by Christians involved in work for peace and social justice to draw attention to the suffering and deaths of innocent people today as a result of war and injustice. A Holy Innocents' Day service has been held annually at St Martin-in-the-Fields Church in Trafalgar Square, most recently coordinated by the Network of Christian Peace Organisations. A different theme has been taken each year, for example the Middle East, or Africa, or the impact of nuclear war on communities. The service has sometimes been linked to a short pilgrimage to Downing Street, to present a letter regarding the theme of the day and modern warfare, to the Prime Minister, and then to the memorial for the victims of war at Westminster Abbey.

Local communities could also mark this day, drawing on local experiences of war and conflict, perhaps telling the stories of refugees and asylum seekers, perhaps making links between local arms producing factories or military bases and the suffering of innocent victims. A service could be developed for use in a church or at a site of suffering or injustice.

The following resources are included and may help you to develop your own approach to Holy Innocents' Day. A local service might include the following components. The Fellowship of Reconciliation and Pax Christi websites may also be a source of information and inspiration to you.

1. The Gospel account in Matthew 2:13-18
2. An outline liturgy, based on one held at St Martin-in-the-Fields in 2003
3. Stories of children and war that could be used as readings
4. A sample reflection - linking the day to the war in Iraq - given at a service in St Martin-in-the-Fields in 2002

---

### **Fellowship of Reconciliation**

St James' Church Centre,  
Beauchamp Lane,  
Oxford OX4 3LF

[www.for.org.uk](http://www.for.org.uk)

### **Pax Christi**

St Joseph's  
Watford Way  
London  
NW4 4TY

[www.paxchristi.org.uk](http://www.paxchristi.org.uk)

## 1. The Gospel according to Matthew sets out the story

When the wise men had departed, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:13-18)

## 2. A sample liturgy for Holy Innocents - focus on Africa and Middle East

### Resources needed

- You may wish to invite a speaker - perhaps someone from the local community who has come to the country seeking refuge from conflict? Someone involved in aid work, representing one of the many UK agencies?
- A large map of the world - displayed in front of the Crib
- Cut-out images, from magazines, newspapers, posters, of children from Africa and the Middle East and a larger gathering of positive images of children from around the world.
- A crib - displayed centrally
- Readers and copies of stories and readings ready for the each reader
- Musicians or facility to play music.

### Welcome and Opening

#### Introductory reading

We come together today to remember and repent of the appalling wrongs done to children, the innocents, especially the children of Africa and the Middle East. It is more than 2000 years since Herod, furious at being 'outwitted' by the wise men, directed that all male babies under two years of age be slaughtered because just one of them might have been Jesus, the infant King of the Jews. The words of the prophet Jeremiah were fulfilled and continue to be fulfilled in our world today:

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
Sobbing and loudly lamenting;  
It was Rachel weeping for her children,  
Refusing to be comforted  
Because they were no more".*

### Opening song/hymn

**First Reflection:** Orphans and Child Soldiers

**Scripture reading:** Matthew 18:5-6 &10

*Images of children are placed on the map of Africa*

*Silence, music or appropriate song*

#### Prayer

L: A voice was heard in the Liberia, a mother weeping for her lost son.

*All: We own our sorrow for the thousands of boys and girls throughout Africa who have been betrayed by adults, forced to become so called 'child soldiers'. They are both victims and perpetrators of violence. Let our sorrow*

*link us with those children throughout the world who are betrayed in this way.*

L: A voice was heard in Rwanda, a grandfather weeping for his grandchildren

*All: We own our sadness for those children orphaned by war, forced to watch their parents die violent deaths. They suffer the violence of war and violence of loneliness. Let our sadness connect us with those near and far who are in need of compassion, companionship and healing.*

**Second Reflection: Child victims of war**

**Scripture reading: Mark 9:36-37**

*Images of children are placed on the map of Africa*

*Silence, music or appropriate song*

**Prayer:**

L: A voice was heard in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a father weeping for his murdered daughter.

*All: We own anger for those children maimed or killed through the violence of war. Let it expose us to our connection with the arms traders and the diamond traders, whose greed for money and resources wreaks havoc throughout the world.*

L: A voice was heard in Sudan, an aunt weeping for her lost family.

*All: We own our shame at the plight of children forced to leave family, home, country in their search for peace. Let it remind us of the need to welcome the stranger, those seeking refuge and asylum from countries where rights are abused or which are torn apart by war.*

L: Merciful God, you forgive our sins and bring us to new life through the power of the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit. May we walk in your ways so that peace becomes a reality among us.

**Scripture reading: Is 9:6-7**

**Third Reflection - Hope for the future - Reflection at the Crib**

With the birth of Jesus, the child of impoverished, marginalized refugees, in a stable on the outskirts of a war zone in a brutal empire, the Gospel s declare that God has intervened in human history, deliberately siding with the poor and oppressed of the world, and becoming first of all vulnerable, like them, to the brutalities of the empire. The birth of Jesus the Christ is marked not only by poverty but, according to the Gospels, imperial violence striking out to kill the nonviolent child, the child of nonviolence, the God of nonviolence

The incarnation by its very happening rules out all killing and all injustices. God chooses to side with human beings and honours human life by becoming human, like us in all things but sin - that is violence .... with the Incarnation, we are bound morally and spiritually not to hurt or kill one another, or else we hold the God of peace Who became one of us, in contempt.

*(Based on a reflection by John Dear SJ from Pax Christi's Promise of Peace)*

**Blessing for the Children of the world**

*(Images of children will be placed around the map of the world as each prayer is said)*

V: Christmas is the time in which we are called to embrace the vulnerability of God. It is a time to care for the Christ-child who is continually born among us in all that is fragile and weak and longing to grow up into God.

It a time to reverence the children of our world who, in their small but real beginnings, are the dawning of the future. So we remember the children of the world with this blessing:

V: Children of the Middle East and Iraq

*All: God's peace is for you*

V: Children of Africa

*All: God's peace is for you*

Children of the America's.

*All: God's peace is for you*

V: Children of Europe

*All: God's peace is for you*

V: Children of Asia

*All: God's peace is for you. May the God of all people and the Lord Jesus Christ give us all grace and peace today and every day.*

*Amen*

We now offer one another a sign of  
God's peace

*Silence, music or appropriate song*

**Prayer of Commitment - Prayer for Africa** said by all

Lord, your strength spears in the sun,  
your greatness in the stars, your  
gentleness in the night in the water of  
the sea.

Lord all your works praise you, and your  
eyes give you thanks for the joy of a  
small child, for a mothers love, for a  
man's strength, for the fragile beauty of  
the world.

We know that you are always aware of  
this fragility. We pray you therefore to  
grant us the courage and the strength

- To persevere in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Africa
- To feed those who are hungry

- To weep for the children who will die in poverty
- To mourn for the victims of war
- To have compassion for those who suffer from Aids
- To bring comfort to the victims of violence, whether physical or moral
- To be builders of peace in a world which is torn by hatred, fear and pride.

Lord, come to the aid of the weak and touch the hearts of the strong. May the fullness of your peace, justice and your reconciliation come to Africa in our time. We make this prayer in the name of Jesus your Son and our Saviour.

Amen

*(Mgr Laurent*

*Mosengwo, Archbishop of Kisingani, DRC)*

**Blessing and sending forth**

May the blessing of God who risked everything for our sake,

The blessing of the Christ-child who releases in us new visions of hope,

The blessing of the Holy Spirit who guides and directs us into new forms of obedience be with us

Go forth as preparers and proclaimers of God's word

**All: We go as witnesses to the God of peace.**

**Thanks be to God**

### 3. Stories of Children and War

#### Orphans in East Africa

In many parts of Africa, children become orphans because of the AIDS epidemic as well as preventable, and curable diseases. But it is a continent where thousands of children are orphaned by regional conflict. They may have seen a parent murdered or simply become separated from family members and unable to trace them.

In Northern Uganda, the International Refugee Trust is one NGO trying to alleviate the needs of such orphans. They facilitate the voluntary labour which is willingly provided by Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. One such home is the Moya Babies Home which "parents" 40 babies. These infants have lost parents either through the ongoing civil war in neighbouring Sudan, or locally as a result of disease or by the attacks of the Ugandan rebels "The Lord's Resistance Army", (LRA). For 17 years now the LRA has been opposing the National Government and terrorizing the population of Northern Uganda.

Another home run by the sisters - for orphan refugee children from Sudan - is the Redeemer Children's Home in Adjumani. All this is inspiring and good news. And this was so until 6 months ago. Sadly on 18<sup>th</sup> June this year, the LRA attacked Redeemer Home, abducting 16 children, 10 girls & 6 boys. Early next day, 4 of the girls managed to escape back to the home and 2 more were found next day, terrified and bruised and wandering in the bush. This leaves 10 children unaccounted for. The youngest is 8 year old Francis Drago, while the oldest is 16.

What might happen to them? They have begun life with the double disadvantage of being refugees and parentless. Now they are among the 20,000 children abducted by the LDA where it is known that they are brutally treated as soldiers, labourers and sex slaves. Girls at 12 are given to rebel commanders for rape.

*(Based on reports from the International Refugee Trust and the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart 2003)*

#### Child soldiers in West Africa

CAFOD, has been monitoring the unstable situation faced by the countries of West Africa this century. It was reported from Sierra Leone, that tensions in neighbouring Liberia and Guinea were intertwined with the conflict in Sierra Leone. As tensions rose, child soldiers were being recruited in Liberia while in Sierra Leone an estimated 10,000 children were involved in the fighting. Millions of children and young people had been scarred by decades of poverty and conflict.

UNICEF estimates 1 in 10 Liberian children have been in the various militias and that these children make up 70% of the militias. It would be more exact to talk of 'child armies' rather than child soldiers in armies!

Today, some of the children have escaped from the militias and tell their stories in rehabilitation, but return to civilian life can be unattractive. The militias fed them with looted booty so they are destitute on running away. Girl children forced to become 'wives' of commanders often have small children of their own from the repeated rapes; they have no means of supporting themselves outside the militias. Returning home may be impossible because communities fear what the children have become. The following life stories will help us to understand why.

9 year old James couldn't remember when he was abducted at knife point and driven to a training camp. He was handed a gun and 30 rounds of ammunition and left to teach

himself how to use it. "It was an AK47" he said, "which was about as long as my arm. But it breaks into two bits so you can make it shorter and easier to use." He found that he enjoyed the adrenaline rush of fighting and the comradeship that came with collective fear. "We captured one man and I shot him in the knee caps. That was the first time I shot anyone and I didn't feel bad."

Neither did 13 year old Paul- at first. But later he says he decided to escape "because I was very small and was killing too many people; it wasn't good for me." He claimed that he had killed about 30 people, of whom 10 were soldiers. "5 were children," he said, "aged about 10,12,11 9 and 1. The baby was on its mother's back and we were passing by shooting; a stray bullet hit the baby and killed him. 3 of the children were soldiers, but the 9 year old was a girl that I met on the road by herself. I asked the girl to give me some money to buy tobacco, but she didn't have any, so that made me angry. I opened fire, killed her and threw her body into the river.

I felt fine killing people. I felt really good. We would see people escaping from the war with mattresses on their heads and we would take their goods and execute them."

*(Based on CAFOD and UNICEF reports 2003)*

### **Second Reflection: Child Victims of War**

The following is an extract from a story by Chika Unigwe. It is about 2 young Nigerian boys who are separated by violent conflict in their neighbourhood. As talk of war increased and intensified, Kingsley, aged 10, relates:-

"Then, the adults started acting weird. My best friend, Sule, who lived with his family in the flat above ours, was not allowed to visit me anymore. Father said Sule was 'the enemy'. Sule, with whom I spent every waking day. We went to the same school, were in the same class and lived in each other's homes. Our parents teased us, calling us each other's shadows. "But Papa, we did not quarrel. He is my best friend." Father grunted, "He is Hausa. He is Muslim. They are killing our people."

We went to school with name tags stuck on our shirts. Men were asked to join the army - and women were asked to have a huge pestle handy - for clubbing any enemy soldiers who might come into their homes.

Sule no longer came to school and an eerie silence settled like fine dust over their flat upstairs. When I asked Mother about this, she said I was too young to understand and that I asked too many questions. That night, I sneaked out and crept up to Sule's flat. The brown door was bashed in, looking all crumpled, and the sitting room was a mass of broken chairs and china.

That night, my nightmares started. I would see Sule, dangerously close to a cliff, calling out to me for help. I stretched out my hand to pull him across to safety but women jeered, and hit me with pestles; I would wake up screaming.

Mother said we should move, because things would only get worse. So we drove 2 hours from Enugu to Osumenyi. I missed Enugu, I missed my school. But most of all, I missed Sule. The last day together we had gone bird-hunting and Sule had left his blue catapult in my bag.

I was grateful for that bit of Sule. For even then, I knew that I would never see my best friend again. I did not know what would happen in the future, but I knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

*(Adapted from the story That bit of Sule, by Chikqa Unigwe, from Lines in the Sand: New Writing on War and Peace. Pub Frances Lincoln)*

## 4. Sample Reflection

### The Innocence of Children and the Responsibilities of Adults

*What follows is a contemporary reflection on the feast of Holly Innocents, by Milan Rai, author of War Plan Iraq, founder member of Voices in the Wilderness (which helped to break sanctions against Iraq) and Justice not Vengeance. Milan gave this reflection on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2002 at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London*

---

I suggest that our focus should not be on King Herod or on the central family of the Nativity Story. What of the soldiers? How do they feel as they rip babies away from crying mothers? What rationalisations do they offer themselves? Are there soldiers brave enough to disobey? What of the civil servants who are coordinating and organising this 'operation'? How do they numb themselves to the consequences of their actions? Are there any brave enough to obstruct or sabotage these 'deployments'? What about the parents? Do they merely protest? Or do they hurl themselves in front of swords? What of older sisters and brothers? What do they do? What do they leave undone? What of their survivors' guilt? Neighbours, local politicians, local priests? What about those in neighbouring countries? What resistance do they offer? What rationalisations do they offer? Is there anyone courageous enough to risk something of themselves to save even one child?

The first child I met in Iraq was a young girl called Zahra. She was in a ward in the Al Mansour Teaching Hospital in Baghdad, being treated for acute malnutrition. Zahra was being treated for 'marasmus', which is characterised by 'old man's face' - a child less than a year old can have the face of an 80 year old. Zahra had an old man's face. She looked out on the world, the world of suffering around her, with calmness and serenity and dignity. I was shocked and humbled and ashamed.

I was ashamed, and I remain ashamed, that I made so little impact on Zahra's life as I passed through that hospital ward. I was ashamed, and I remain ashamed, that the movement which many of us here today are part of has had so little impact on the conditions of life that have suffocated Zahra's generation. I was ashamed, and I remain ashamed, that this society here - this city of London - has continued to function normally, while our government helps to crush an entire nation.

Now, after twelve years of vigils, leaflets, meetings with Foreign Office officials, public meetings, letters to MPs, letters to Cabinet ministers, petitions to Downing Street, nonviolent civil disobedience in the streets of London, sanctions-breaking delegations to Baghdad and Basra... After twelve years of grinding destruction through economic sanctions, we have come to this: The impending slaughter of innocents through invasion and war. We are being driven reluctantly and unwillingly into a war without reason, whose cost will be counted in the blood of those without guilt.

As diplomats and inspectors forge nonviolent solutions, President Bush seeks confrontation and destruction. And our Prime Minister prepares to contribute British forces. Our leaders seem heedless of the disruption war will certainly wreak on the fragile distribution of vital humanitarian goods in Iraq - goods which millions of families depend on for survival.

Our leaders appear careless of the damage war will do to the essential public health infrastructure of Iraq. Our leaders proceed towards war fully aware of the foreseeable consequences of their actions - of the 'blood price' to be paid by ordinary families in Iraq, now and in the months and years to come. Those of us who sit here - who are almost all of us among the rich of the world, secure and privileged - I ask you to reflect on all those

involved by their actions, or by their inaction, in the slaughter recounted in the story of Holy Innocents Day. Are we willing to be obedient soldiers, or conscienceless bureaucrats? Or are we willing to disobey? Are we strong enough to be good and decent neighbours? Are we brave enough to be real brothers and sisters? Are we willing to be the loving, enraged parents of the children of Iraq? This service, here in this great church in this great city, is a challenge to us. Or it is an empty ceremony.

It is a meaningless mouthing of dead words, if it does not force each one of us to ask ourselves a life- question.

And we reveal ourselves to be empty, meaningless and dead if we are not forced to ask ourselves: What of myself, what of my life, am I prepared to give - to risk - to prevent and restrain this slaughter of innocents, to save even one child in Iraq?"