

# Lament for the children

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 1 January 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Christmas 1A

**Isaiah 63: 7-9; Matthew 2: 13-23; Contemporary reading:  
*Witness by Eva Hoffman, from the forward to Ety Hillesum, An  
Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork***

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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Our Gospel today tells the story of what is traditionally called "*The Massacre of the Holy Innocents*." How Herod, in an attempt to kill the newborn Messiah, ordered the deaths of all boys under the age of two in the Bethlehem area.

Whatever the historicity – or lack thereof – of this text it is a salutary point in time to reflect, mourn and lament the violence towards children here in Australia and around the world.

On this Sunday, as we tell that story of the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus into Egypt to escape terrorist violence, we remember the plight of refugee people in our time, worse now than at any time since the Second World War.

For many people, this Christmas was a challenge. We questioned how we could celebrate the Good News at a time when the global news is unrelentingly bad. How can we celebrate light in a time of darkness? Today we are reminded that the story of the first Christmas was not all light and peace either. Through the wonder of it all, through the glory of the manger and angels and shepherds, King Herod hovered ominously in the background.

I wonder if you could look at your service sheet and inside the front cover, there is a picture. This painting, "*Omran, Angels Are Here!*" is by Salt Lake City artist Judith Mehr. It is based on a photograph by Syrian Mahmoud Raslan.

Omran Daqneesh is the 5-year-old Syrian who was injured and shell shocked in an airstrike believed to have been by the Russian Air Force, but honestly who knows. Both sides have the blood of innocents on their hands. Even the photographer may not be blameless.

The source of the bomb makes little difference to Omran. His gaze conveys a sense of exhaustion and apathy in a war with no winners but very clear losers.

Omran's 10-year-old brother Ali died in the attack, while the rest of the family was rescued from their apartment building that collapsed shortly afterwards.

Judith Mehr wrote, "*I saw that photo of the little boy in the ambulance seat who had just been pulled out of the rubble of a bombed building in Aleppo, Syria. I really wanted to comfort that boy so I thought of angels coming to attend to him.*"

The staging of her painting is related to Rublev's famous Icon of the Trinity.

The writing around the halos announces: 'joy, peace, hope' in Arabic, English and Latin.

And at the top: "Peace be upon you" is written in Arabic.

I invite you to keep looking at that picture as I read a meditative reading called *"Where are the Angels?"* by Scottish liturgist, Sally-Foster Fulton.



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*"I don't know about angels, but I do know a bit about good and evil, and I do believe that if God sends angels they probably look an awful lot like you and me.*

*We don't always know what effect our actions are going to have, even our smallest actions. But if we act in faith, then what we do in faith may reach further than we could ever imagine.*

*In the film *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the main characters, Frodo Baggins, is feeling overwhelmed by what he has been asked to do: he has to destroy the ring that has the power of all evil. He says that he wishes none of this had come to him, and that he was home and everything had been as it was.*

*But Gandalf, the wise wizard, reminds him that we don't have the ability to choose the time in which we live or the power to control what happens to us. We can only decide what we will do with the time given. That is within our power.*

*If we chose to act in faith, then our actions may do more good than we'll ever know, or could possibly imagine.*

*If there are to be angels winging their way to the broken world we live in, then we must begin to fly. God's trust has been put in us. What will you choose to do with it?*

*They are such beautiful babies, in the refugee camps and the orphanages all over the world. Yet Herods continue to issue the orders and cause untold "collateral damage". All over the world, mothers and fathers, their eyes dark with grief, ask the same question: "Why? Why my beautiful baby?"*

*If there are to be angels winging their way to the broken world, then we must begin to fly, work to melt cold hearts in order to weaken the resolve for war, acting in faith, trusting that God will multiply our efforts.*

*We need to hear the prayer 'All night, all day angels watching over me, my Lord. All night, all day, angels watching over me.' We need to be that prayer in this world of ours.*

*I can't help but wonder, when I read this story about Jesus, the one who escaped, if God went to so much trouble to warn one family, why there still aren't enough angels to go round. Where are those angels? Only heaven knows. But maybe we do too."*

Our second Meditative Reading is from "*Let a Child be a Child*" by Rowan Williams. He begins by quoting the collect for this Sunday – from the Anglican Prayer Book;

***"O Almighty God, who madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths..."***

Williams says:

*I cannot quite remember when I realized that the Book of Common Prayer, which I love deeply, is capable of such sonorous blasphemy. But I do not know what else you could call its Collect for the commemoration of the Holy Innocents, the children massacred by King Herod in his attempt to eliminate the child Jesus.*

*It is not exactly that God is being accused of engineering the deaths of these infants, but he is being represented as guilty of one of the most nauseating sins of ours and others cultures.*

*The sacrifice or suffering of children is colonised by some adult system of meaning, it is given a significance that makes it possible for us to contemplate it without horror.*

*In Central Africa, in the armies of Laurent Kabila, or in Iran or Iraq, with their revolutionary guards, it is the same phenomenon, children conscripted into a bloody adult conflict, their pain supposedly transfigured by an adult cause... How is this basically different from God turning a sickening massacre to edifying religious ends? The Book of Common Prayer rapidly escapes into remote territory, into metaphor, talking about how we must mortify our vices and recover our innocence... the butchered child ends up as nothing more than a symbol for our moral problems.*

*A Christian at prayer ought to know better. One of the enormous and disturbing originalities of Jesus was his insistent pointing to the child not as metaphor but as reality, even as an instructor.*

*Jesus is not sentimentalizing childhood innocence. He is saying something more like this; the child is in the most serious and irreducible way an 'other' to any adult. The child does not share an agenda, perhaps does not even share a language with adults; the child is simply there, a human reality that is not involved in adult rivalries and negotiations. What matters about the child is his or her presence and difference, all at once. The child should strip us of the assumption that our agenda is the natural and obvious one.*

*Only when that happens, says Jesus, do we get any inkling what the Reign of God might mean.*

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In memory of the children who have been injured or killed by adult agendas and adult violence... let us now hold a time of silence.

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And now a prayer of lament, as tears are shed... <sup>1</sup>

We lament,  
we name the rawness of pain,  
we cry out to heaven for justice  
for children who suffer the most extraordinary cruelty.  
For the children of Aleppo and in every place torn apart by war.

*Water poured symbolising tears...*

For children who are refugees.

*Water poured symbolising tears...*

For children who are trafficked in the sex trade and whose bodies and souls are abused.

*Water poured symbolising tears...*

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<sup>1</sup> Lament Prayer by David Poultney (Methodist Presbyterian, Aotearoa NZ)

For children compelled to fight in wars.

*Water poured symbolising tears...*

For children who are made to work, often in virtual slavery.

*Water poured symbolising tears...*

For children whose hearts and minds are poisoned by the abuse of religion.

*Water poured symbolising tears...*

For the children here in this land of Australia who suffer at the hands of those who should care for them - the most terrible physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

*Water poured symbolising tears...*

We have poured out our anger,  
our shock, our grieving  
and our shame in lament,  
may the pain of children cry out to heaven for justice,  
and may we do justice by every child,  
for they are all our children.  
Amen.

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For five more days, it is still Christmas. If there is to be light, it will be as we join with others who are working against all forms of violence, for the wellbeing of children and against the ruination of the earth, for racial justice, for civil dialogue and against xenophobia.

We cannot do this by despair or hopelessness but only in partnership with each other, with the people on the doorstep of our church and our wider community and with the Divine Presence who is with us always.

For this Christmas and this New Year, I conclude with words of inspiration from Karl Rahner:

*A new year has begun.  
During this year too, all the paths from  
east to west,  
from morning until evening,  
lead on and on as far as the eye can see,  
through the deserts of life with all its  
changes.  
But these paths too can be turned into  
the blessed pilgrimage to the absolute,  
the journey to God.  
Set out my heart! Take up the journey!  
The star shines.*

*You can't take much with you on the  
journey.  
And you will lose much on the way. Let  
it go.  
Gold of love,  
incense of yearning,  
myrrh of suffering,  
these you certainly have with you.  
God shall accept you.  
And you shall find God.*