

DECEMBER XXVIII.

THE HOLY INNOCENTS.

Matthew, ~~xi~~, 16.

OUR Divine Redeemer was persecuted by the world as soon as he made his appearance in it; for he was no sooner born than it declared war against him. We cannot expect to be better treated than our great Master was before us. He himself bids us remember that if it hated him first, it will likewise hate us, though we have more reason to fear its flatteries and smiles than its rage. The first make a much more dangerous and more violent assault upon our hearts. Herod, in persecuting Christ, was an emblem of Satan and of the world. That ambitious and jealous prince had already sacrificed to his fears and suspicions the most illustrious part of his council, his virtuous wife Mariamne, with her mother Alexandra, the two sons he had by her, and the heirs to his crown, and all his best friends. Hearing from the magians who were come from distant countries to find and adore Christ, that the Messias, or spiritual king of the Jews, foretold by the prophets, was born among them, he trembled lest he was come to take his temporal kingdom from him. So far are the thoughts of carnal and worldly men from the ways of God; and so strangely do violent passions blind and alarm them. The tyrant was disturbed beyond measure, and resolved to take away the life of this child, as if he could have defeated the decrees of heaven. He had recourse to his usual arts of policy and dissimulation, and hoped to receive intelligence of the child by feigning a desire himself to adore him; but God laughed at the folly of his short-sighted prudence, and admonished the magians not to return to him. St. Joseph was likewise ordered by an angel to take the child and his mother, and to fly into Egypt. Is our Blessed Redeemer, the Lord of the universe, to be banished as soon as born! What did not he suffer! What did not his pious parents suffer on his account in so tedious and long a journey, and during a long abode in Egypt, where they were entirely strangers, and destitute of all succour under the hardships of

extreme poverty! It is an ancient tradition of the Greeks mentioned by Sozomen,(1) St. Athanasius,(2) and others, that at his entrance into Egypt all the idols of that kingdom fell to the ground, which literally verified the prediction of the prophet Isaiah.(3) Mary and Joseph were not informed by the angel how long their exile would be continued; by which we are taught to leave all to divine providence, acquiescing with confidence and simplicity in the adorable and ever holy will of Him who disposes all things in infinite goodness, sanctity, and wisdom.

Herod, finding that he had been deluded by the magians, was transported with rage and anxious fears. To execute his scheme of killing the Messias, the desired of all nations and the expectation of Israel, he formed the bloody resolution of murdering all the male children in Bethlehem and the neighbouring territory which were not above two years of age. In this example we admire how blind and how furious the passion of ambition is. Soldiers are forthwith sent to execute these cruel orders, who, on a sudden, surrounded the town of Bethlehem, and massacred all the male children in that and the adjacent towns and villages, who had been born in the two last years. This more than brutish barbarity, which would almost have surpassed belief, had not Herod been the contriver, and ambition the incentive, was accompanied with such shrieks of mothers and children, that St. Matthew applies to it a prophecy of Jeremiah, which may be understood in part to relate more immediately to the Babylonish captivity, but which certainly received the most eminent completion at this time. *A voice in Rama was heard, lamentation and great mourning: Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.* Rama is a village not far from this town, and the sepulchre of Rachel was in a field belonging to it. The slaughter also was probably extended into the neighbouring tribe of Benjamin, which descended from Rachel. The Ethiopians in their liturgy, and the Greeks in their calendar, count fourteen thousand children massacred on this occasion; but

(1) Sozomen, l. 5, c. 21, p. 213, ed. Cantabrigiæ, per Reading.

(2) S. Athan. l. de Incarn. Verbi. Calmet, Vie de Jesus C. c. 7, p. 21.

(3) Isaiah xix. 1.

that number exceeds all bounds, nor is it confirmed by any authority of weight. Innocent victims became the spotless Lamb of God; and how great a happiness was such a death to these glorious martyrs! They deserved to die for Christ, though they were not yet able to know or invoke his name. They were the flowers and the first fruits of his martyrs, and triumphed over the world, without having ever known it, or experienced its dangers. They just received the benefit of life, to make a sacrifice of it to God, and to purchase by it eternal life. Almost at the same time they began to live and to die; they received the fresh air of this mortal life forthwith to pass to immortality; and it was their peculiar glory not only to die for the sake of Christ, and for justice and virtue, but also in the place of Christ, or in his stead. How few perhaps of these children, if they had lived, would have escaped the dangers of the world, which, by its maxims and example, bear everything down before it like an impetuous torrent! What snares, what sins, what miseries were they preserved from by this grace! With what songs of praise and love do they not to all eternity thank their Saviour, and this his infinite mercy to them! Their ignorant foolish mothers did not know this, and therefore they wept without comfort. So we often lament as misfortunes many accidents which in the designs of heaven are the greatest mercies.

In Herod we see how blind and how cruel ambition is, which is ready to sacrifice every thing, even Jesus Christ, to its views. The tyrant lived not many days longer to enjoy the kingdom which he feared so much to lose.* About the time of our Lord's nativity he fell sick, and as his distemper sensibly increased, despair and remorse followed him, and made him insupportable both to himself and others. The innumerable crimes which he had committed were the tortures of his mind, whilst a slow imposthume, inch by inch, gnawed and consumed

* Antipater, whom Herod had by his wife Doris, and who had, by wicked artifices, engaged his father to put to death his two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, (the two last princes of the Asmonean family by their mother Mariamne,) formed a conspiracy against the life of his father. Of this crime he was convicted before Quintilius Varus, who had succeeded Saturninus in the government of Syria, and whom Herod had entreated to preside in this trial at Jerusalem

his bowels, feeding principally upon one of the great guts, though it extended itself over all the rest, and, corroding the flesh, made a breach in the lower belly, and became a sordid ulcer, out of which worms issued in swarms, and lice were also bred in his flesh. A fever violently burnt him within, though outwardly it was scarcely perceptible; and he was tormented with a canine appetite, which no victuals could satisfy. Such an offensive smell exhaled from his body, as shocked his best friends; and uncommon twitchings and vellications upon the fibrous and membranous parts of his body, like sharp razors, cut and wounded him within; and the pain thence arising overpowered him, at length, with cold sweats, tremblings, and convulsions. Antipater in his dungeon, hearing in what a lamentable condition Herod lay, strongly solicited his jailer to set him at liberty, hoping to obtain the crown; but the officer acquainted Herod with the whole affair. The tyrant groaning under the complication of his own distempers, upon this information, vented his spleen by raving and beating his own head, and calling one of his guards, commanded him to go that instant and cut off Antipater's head. Not content with causing many to be put to barbarous deaths during the course of his malady, he commanded the Jews that were of the principal rank and quality to be shut up in a circus at Jericho, and gave orders to his sister Salome and her husband Alexas to have them all massacred as soon as he should have expired, saying, that as the Jews heartily hated him, they would rejoice at his departure; but he would make a general mourning of the whole nation at his death.(1) This circumstance is at least related by the Jewish historian Josephus. Herod died five days after he had put his son Antipater to death. Macrobius, a heathen writer of the fifth century, relates,(2) that Augustus, "when he heard that, among the children which Herod had commanded to be slain under two years old, his own son had been massacred, said: 'It is better to be Herod's hog than his son.'" By this he alluded to the Jewish law of not eating, and consequently not killing swine. Probably the historian imagined the son to have been slain amongst the children, because the news of both massacres reached Rome about the same time.

(1) Jos. Ant. l. 17, c. 7.

(2) Macrobi. Saturn. l. 2, c. 4.

Parents, pastors, and tutors are bound to make it their principal care, that children, in their innocent age, be by piety and charity consecrated as pure holocausts to God. This is chiefly to be done by imprinting upon their minds the strongest sentiments of devotion, and by instructing them thoroughly in their catechism. We cannot entertain too high an idea of the merit and obligation of teaching God's little ones to know him, and the great and necessary truths which he has revealed to us. Without knowing him no one can love him, or acquit himself of the most indispensable duties which he owes to his Creator. Children must be instructed in prayer and the principal articles of faith as soon as they attain to the use of reason, that they may be able to give him his first fruits by faith, hope, and love, as by the law of reason and religion they are bound to do. The understanding of little children is very weak, and is able only to discover small glimpses of light. Great art, experience, and earnestness are often required to manage and gradually increase these small rays, and to place therein whatever one would have the children comprehend. The lessons must be very short, and the truths which are taught made sensible when possible, by examples, images, and comparisons, adapted to the capacities of those that are to be instructed. The catechist, without demeaning himself, must become a little one with those that are little. This he must do with suitable gravity and seriousness; and it is only by his own earnestness and application that he can make them attentive and earnest. Were he at the same time to joke, or attend to, or be employed in any other thing, he would in vain recommend seriousness and attention to those that hear him. O how great ought to be the zeal of children and others to attend to that saving doctrine, without which man is a riddle to himself, and no one can attain to salvation and the love of God! That sublime science which *the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, came from heaven*(1) to declare to us. *The queen of the South came from the bounds of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon: behold more than Solomon is here?*(2) When the Athenians had forbidden any citizen of Megara to set foot in Athens under pain of death, one Euclides, an inhabitant of

(1) John i. 18

(2) Matt. xii. 42

Megara, went disguised many miles in the night to assist at the lectures of Socrates the next morning, and returned the night following; and this he continued to do a long time with the hazard of his life.(1) If such was the earnestness of this heathen to learn a profane philosophy, with what zeal ought a Christian to study the true and sublime science of faith, which leads to eternal life! The most ardent desire of this instruction is the surest mark of true virtue, and of that vehement hunger and thirst of God's just and holy love, which is the very soul of sincere piety.

The solicitude and diligence of parents and pastors to instruct others in this sacred science, ought not to lessen; neither must any one regard the function as mean or contemptible. It is the very foundation of the Christian religion. By this function the seeds of piety and religion are planted in the hearts of the faithful, which produce their fruit according to the manner in which they are received. A good catechist contributes more towards maintaining public peace, than all the laws and magistrates; as inferior ties of duty are far more binding than coercive force. Hence Pope Paul III. in a bull in which he recommends this employment, declares that "nothing is more fruitful or more profitable for the salvation of souls." No pastoral function is more indispensable, none more beneficial, and generally none more meritorious; we may add, or more sublime. For under a meaner exterior appearance, without pomp, ostentation, or show of learning or abilities, it joins the exercise of humility with the most zealous and most profitable function of the pastoral charge. Being painful and laborious, it is, moreover, an exercise of patience and penance. Neither can any one think it beneath his parts or dignity. The great St. Austin, St. Chrysostom, St. Cyril, and other most learned doctors, popes, and bishops, applied themselves with singular zeal and assiduity to this duty of catechising children and all ignorant persons; this they thought a high branch of their duty, and the most useful and glorious employment of their learning and talents. What did the apostles travel over the world to do else? St. Paul said: *I am a debtor to the wise and to the unwise.*(2) *We became little ones in*

(1) Aul. Gell. Noct. Attic. l. 6, c. 10.

(2) Rom. i. 14.

the midst of you, as if a nurse would cherish her children; so desirous of you, that we would gladly have imparted to you not only the gospel of God, but even our own souls.(1) Our Divine Lord himself made this the principal employment of his ministry. *The spirit of the Lord is upon me: he hath sent me to preach the gospel to the poor.*(2) He declared the pleasure he found in assisting that innocent age, when he said: *Suffer little children to come unto me, for the kingdom of God is for such. And embracing them, and laying his hands upon them he blessed them.*(3) John Gerson, the most pious and celebrated chancellor of Paris, esteemed an oracle for his learning, testified his zeal for this sacred function by his book entitled, *On drawing Little Ones to Christ*. All his life he employed a considerable part of his time in teaching little children their catechism. Upon his return from the general council of Constance, he retired to the city of Lyons, where he every day assembled the children in St. Paul's church, and taught them the Christian doctrine, till he was confined to his bed by his last illness. When he drew near his death, he caused all the little children to be called together into the church, and there to repeat with one voice: "My God, my Creator, have mercy on thy poor servant, John Gerson."(4)

SAINT THEODORUS, ABBOT OF TABENNA, C.

ON account of the extraordinary purity of his manners, from his very infancy, surnamed by the Greeks *The Sanctified*. Such was the edification which the whole church received in the fourth and fifth centuries from many great lights of the monastic Order, which then shone in the deserts of Egypt, that Theodoret (5) and Procopius (6) think the flourishing state of these holy recluses was particularly foretold in those passages of the prophets, in which it is said of the age of the New Law of Grace, that, *The wilderness shall bud forth and blossom, and shall rejoice with joy and praise,* (7) &c. Which interpretation is ingeniously applied to the same purpose by F. Pos-

(1) 1 Thess. ii. 7, 8.

(2) Luke iv. 18.

(3) Mark x. 14, 16.

(4) Vita Gerson. t. 1, op. p. 169.

(5) Theodoret, in Isa. lxi. 3.

(6) Procop. in eund. loc. p. 705.

(7) Isa. xxxv. 1, 2, 6, 7. Isa. lxi. 3, 4, &c.