

10-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Schmidt, Gail Ramshaw (1982) "The Word in the world," *Consensus*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol8/iss4/3>

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THE WORD IN THE WORLD

Gail Ramshaw Schmidt

I wish to approach the topic of "The Word in the World," by talking about something seldom pondered by most of us: the slaughter of the innocents.

I recently visited the town of Siena in Italy. While it is hardly my favourite city, its worst feature in my view is in Siena cathedral. Indeed, one reason to visit the cathedral is to get a sense of how brutal and wretched European life was in the middle ages. For at the cathedral one still sees the construction site stopped midway. The walls were meant to double the *Duomo's* size, but then the Black Plague struck and Siena was decimated. The walls stand there abandoned, a kind of mammoth tombstone to the thousands killed by the plague. Inside the cathedral are more signs of death, great mosaic floor tiles depicting Old Testament battles—though of course the soldiers' dress and weapons are period to the cathedral itself. It looks as if the part of the bible which was known best was its warfare. And there, nearby the pulpit, is a scene in floor tiles, perhaps six by ten meters in size, a depiction of the slaughter of the innocents. Herod is enthroned, ordering a dozen medieval soldiers to their task; fifteen women wail, contorted in their sorrow, already twelve babies lie dead under the soldiers' feet, and several more are being tossed on swords' edge, being eternally killed there on the floor tile of the Siena cathedral.

Why? Why would anyone dedicate in their church such a grotesque depiction of

such a wretched story? And of course the Siena floor tile is not the only piece of medieval art in which the children are being slaughtered. In the Cloisters in New York City there is a set of wood panels, carvings from a fourteenth century abbey church—perhaps the wainscotting in the choir—and there too is a slaughter of the innocents: two cruel soldiers' faces, the baby dead in the air. Not only art, but also poetry seemed intrigued by this story. In a poem from the Byzantine liturgy, the number of dead infants has escalated to 14,000, the grim tale growing in horror. The Oxford Book of Carols boasts seven carols specific to this day.

Let us recall the story, told by Matthew (2:16-18), after he says that the wise men traveled for miles to adore the child:

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by 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 were no more.”

On these few verses rest the grotesque art which leaves us wondering. However, these verses give us not only a history of art, but also a contemporary liturgical observance, indeed, a “lesser festival,” as the *Lutheran Book of Worship* calls it, on December 28. In the years 1986 and 1997 December 28 will fall on a Sunday, and the lessons of the slaughter of the innocents will be read throughout Christendom. Choirs will sing the Coventry Carol, of “Herod the King in his raging.” So close upon our cultural oogling over the infant in the manger comes this story of screaming infants and wailing parents. We call these children martyrs, those killed for the sake of Christ. We dress in red, not for bows and Christmas berries, but for flowing blood, and remember the death of the infants near to the life of the newborn Jesus.

Why? Why the Siena floor tile? Why this observance in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and its proximity to Christmas? A few years back several articles in the *Lutheran Forum* discussed this festival, and those who object to the observance have some persuasive arguments. Ought we celebrate such brutality? How can we make a festival out of the murder of children? How, four years hence, can we commemorate the slaughter with Christmas trees still up?

There is the further question of historical accuracy. Some biblical interpreters provide ample discussion of the difficulties in this story and make us question whether it even ever happened. How can we jive Luke's history with Matthew's? What is our continuing debt to old stories we no longer wish to believe? Even Raymond E. Brown, in his massive study *The Birth of the Messiah*,¹ who tries valiantly to give the story both historical credulity and religious meaning, admits that in Bethlehem and its environs there were at most twenty boy children, twenty at very most.

Let us leave this question for a few moments to talk about something else. I would

1. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977).

like to tell you now about a new novel by D.M. Thomas entitled *The White Hotel*.²

Last year D.M. Thomas, a little known British poet, published a novel which both as hardback and this year as paperback was a bestseller in the States for months. The reading public devoured the book, and literary critics as well raved about the quality of the writing. The novel is about a twentieth century woman named Elizabeth Erdman who in 1919 sought psychiatric assistance from Sigmund Freud to deal with her severe neurotic symptoms. The book begins with records of her wild sexual fantasies, but always her ecstasy is held parallel to the horrendous suffering of those around her. We then read Freud's diagnosis. Not surprisingly, he analyzes her neurosis as related to her parents' sexual problems, but even he admits that his theory cannot probe the deepest level of Elizabeth's suffering.

The novel goes on. In 1929 Elizabeth, much improved, meets and marries an older Jewish man. She has a new light on her past, for, devout Catholic that she is, she suspects that she is really half Jewish. Her suffering is then placed in the broader context of global anti-Semitism. But she becomes a loyal wife and mother in the Jewish quarter of Kiev.

But the novel goes on. Kiev in the 1930s was no place for a Jew to live. Elizabeth finally joins the rest of Kiev's Jews, herded towards the ravine, machine-gunned into a mass grave at Babi Yar. She could have saved herself, with that crucifix around her neck, but she chose to stand by her Jewish stepson. She dies at Babi Yar, reciting the Ave Maria.

But the novel does not conclude with the Nazi soldier raping this old woman with a bayonet. There is a final chapter—wonder of wonders!—the Jews really did take the train to Palestine! Elizabeth and all of Europe's Jews are in a refugee camp styled Paradise, where spayed cats give birth, but where human beings still bear their earthly wounds.

This novel is a picture of this century: our obsession with the meaning of sex; our focus on the individual neurotic; our interest in cultural roots; our struggle with family systems; our history of anti-Semitism; our recognition of global evil; the fact of genocide; our partial images of the resurrection. This book of death and life is well worth reading.

This novel talks about the world. The truth of this novel describes individual, familial, social, and global agony. Our word "agony" comes from the Greek word *agon*, meaning struggle. No matter how effectively Elizabeth can conquer one struggle, another harder one is forthcoming. We too turn from private pain only to encounter familial and social and global agony.

The question for the liturgy is how to offer that pain to God. How can we make the liturgy open to such pain as Elizabeth knew? Ten years ago we tried by writing new liturgies filled with versicles about Viet Nam and responses about world hunger. Most of these liturgies are now lost in file cabinets, for the language we wrote was simply not accurate enough, not deep enough to bear the weight, not open enough to individual suffering. We wrote labored confessions of sins in which we confessed everything from nuclear stockpiling to migrant worker oppression. We prayed in-

2. D.M. Thomas, *The White Hotel* (New York: Viking, 1981).

tercessions that were really “smartass prayers,” in which we told God in careful detail how to solve all the problems of the world. It was not wrong so to do. But it fell far short.

Lutherans have another way in which death enters their liturgy. We, people of the theology of the cross, are fluent with imagery of death. We mourn the wounds of Christ or the wounded world and then, by changing our tone of voice, proclaim that the cross is different, death made into life. This is familiar talk to us, but how convincing is it to the world? We must examine whether our use of the theology of the cross is something other than maudlin meditation on the passion or revelries on death.

The question stays with us. Can the liturgy in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* carry the weight of the world? How can the ancient words and the classic texts and the historic festivals offer to God the terror of our hearts in this age?

We come to the other word in our title, “Word”. We Lutherans know that “Word” never means merely words, not even the good words about forgiveness, the words of the liturgy spoken responsively, or the words of the gospel faithfully proclaimed. We get our use of “Word” from John’s gospel. The Word is not words, but Christ. It is not that the liturgy of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* bears the world on its shoulders, but that Christ does, and has, and will. If it is our conviction that the Word in the world is Christ, then our liturgy must proclaim that Christ is in the world. Let us look at several familiar parts of our liturgy, examining their images, to find the Word in the world.

“The sign of the cross may be made.” So we begin. This is no petty gesture, placing ourselves under the sign of Christ’s cross, donning that death, recalling that living water. It is a more radical gesture than kneeling, which all religions prescribe; more surprising than the kiss of peace, a cultural tradition turned Christian. No. The sign of the cross is an act of faith in the horror and the glory of Christ’s cross. The cross says both holocaust and paradise. It says, in this sign I conquer: I die in the water and rise to dance. This is no small thing. It is Christ dying and alive, the word in the world.

We sing the Gloria, an exuberant hymn of praise. But here too the song hears the wretched cry of the world. The call of the angels, “Glory to God!”, greets the shepherds, the poor of an oppressed land, begging for a Messiah. Some lines further we sing another Kyrie: Lamb of God, slain for our safety, your blood on our door, have mercy on us. We are only lowly petitioners before the divine throne. We then call Christ the “Holy One.” Remember who also did that? The demoniac, the madman looked at Jesus and named him the Holy One of God. So in the Gloria we keep motley company: magnificent angels, grubby shepherds, terrified Hebrews, lowly petitioners, screaming wildmen. With them all we praise Christ, the word of God alive in such a world as this, for such people as this.

Then there are the intercessory prayers. It seems that if we really believed in the efficacy of prayer, we would spend a good deal longer praying. And we need not feel required to tell God the way to solve the world’s problems. We need only to hold up before God the wretched of the world and to plead for God’s grace. We can be far more inclusive than we usually are. D.M. Thomas’ novel would remind us to pray for tormented and lonely people; for wretched family situations; for ghetto people and for refugees; for those who are persecuted; for those who today will die. Look on them, O God, with tearful eyes, and grant your grace to all.

We come then to the eucharistic prayer. My favorite in the *Lutheran Book of Wor-*

ship is the translation of the Hippolytus prayer, written in the second century. "He is your Word," we pray with the ancient Hippolytus. "It is he," we acclaim, who in order to destroy death, to break the bonds of the evil one, to crush hell underfoot, to give light to the righteous, taking bread and giving thanks, said, Take and eat. Note how this grand sentence says "the Word in the world." Christ said take and eat, and so destroyed death and crushed hell. The life of eating and the death of Christ are held together, even in one sentence, the Word in the world, the bread of life shared in the face of death.

Finally let us return to our beginning, to the festival of the holy innocents. Here again is the Word in the world, the birth of God next to the slaughter of the Bethlehem children. Christmas is, after all, not about Santa Claus, but about God's hearing the cries of wailing Rachel, God's hearing that cry in Christ. "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's suffering," says the second lesson for the day, as the death of the toddlers, and our death, shares in the death of Christ.

Let us hear the prayer of the day:

We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by order of King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims, and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, peace, and love, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is a lot in this prayer: we recall a holy story; we plead for God's mercy on all who suffer; we plead for God's might to bring on the kingdom. Those words contain the woes of countless human predicaments. We remember the infant boys killed by the Pharaoh of old. We know that Herod ordered his soldiers to murder various prominent citizens at the moment of his death so that there would be grief in the land. There was Mary, holding her dead Son. Thousands died with bullets in their back at Babi Yar, and today innocents are being slaughtered in Iraq and Lebanon. For all these we plead mercy. We know the injustice and hate and war which describe the human race: against all this we plead God's might.

Much of the language of the liturgy is like this: it is metaphor. Metaphor is both simpler and deeper than descriptive and analytical language. It says less and covers more. It offers an image, a picture, a story into which we exert ourselves, our praises and our pleas. One could call the liturgy a corporate recital of images of the faith in praise of God. We assemble under the cross. We sing with the angels, at the Exodus, in God's throne room, with the demoniac. We are the soldiers and the wailing women, we are even the dead babies. We use these images to say that we are the world, and we hold these images up to Christ for rebirth, for new life from the Word to this world. The Word speaks in the world because, while the baby Jesus escaped death this time, a later Herod condemned him to a death for us.

And so while I would vote against a grotesque floor tile in any church depicting bleeding babies, I admit that such an image has more to do with the Christian faith than many of our sappy pictures of Jesus or, worse yet, our ignorant pictures of God. Our God, says Hebrews, is a consuming fire; therefore we are to worship God with reverence and awe. The Word Christ in the world, the holding together of life and death in God: the liturgy can help us to this endeavor, the liturgy with its texts, its lessons, its festivals.