

Holy Innocents 28th

Following the joyful news of Jesus' birth we are confronted by an appallingly familiar tragedy; the massacre of little children arising from the grasp for power.

Matthew 2

16 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. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 "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."

It is hardly surprising that artists and patrons have either avoided this subject, or dealt with it awkwardly.

William Holman Hunt, perhaps best known for *The Light of the World* (1851-3) representing Christ knocking at the door. In the mid 1850's he travelled to the Holy Land, earnestly seeking to have his painting "make more tangible Jesus Christ's history and teaching". This resulted in a series of works then and later of highly unconventional iconography, including his *The Triumph of the Innocents* (1883-4) painted after a return visit to Israel in the late 70s. He depicts Mary, Joseph and the baby fleeing on their way to Egypt after Joseph had been warned of the threat to the child's life from Herod.

Hunt described his intention in a letter

The beings I want to represent really differ in this, that they have only just left this life instead of having got altogether established as celestial creatures. Some of them, if not all, may indeed scarcely have altogether lost the last warmth of mortal life. It seems desirable, therefore, to avoid a treatment which would make them like the angels who regard the face of our Father in heaven. A support to this view I find also in the desirability of avoiding to distinctly pronounce the figures to be either subjective or objective. I wish to avoid positively declaring them to be more than a vision to the Virgin conjured up by her maternal love for her own child, the Saviour, who is to be calling her attention to them.



Thomas Becket 29th

The life of Thomas Becket, (1119/20 – 1170) has been the stuff of legend since the time of his violent death on 29th December 1170 at the hands of four of Henry 11's knights in the Cathedral of Canterbury where the king, then his close friend had appointed him as Archbishop in 1162 – and that before he was ordained. The murder has been described as "changing the course of history". He was immediately acclaimed as a martyr, and accordingly his body, his spilled blood, and many of his possessions were treated as holy relics.

This enamel casket from Limoges was made to contain relics of the Archbishop, and depicts the murder on both sides.



Almost immediately an extraordinary wave of miracles was reported, and Thomas was canonized just 26 months after his death. His tomb became one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Europe; being seen as a champion of the Church his devotion spread widely.

Pilgrims could purchase lead ampullae (water vessels) and badges - this one on the right depicting Thomas' return to England after six years exile in France - to take home.

His tomb continued to be an important site for hundreds of years, until destroyed during the Reformation in 1538.

John Wyclif c 1328 – 1364) 31st

Emily Michael has characterized Wyclif as “the evening star of scholasticism and as the morning star of the English Reformation”. While his role as translator of the New Testament into Middle English (from Latin) has received considerable emphasis his wide-ranging and speculative thought was perhaps even more important. He was born in Yorkshire, but spent most of his life, at least from 1325, at Oxford, although as an ordained priest he had connections with a number of parishes. He seems to have been deeply impacted by the Black Death, which tore through Europe around 1348, killing in some areas between one third and one half of the population. Wyclif saw, in this light, the impending end of the world, making serious consideration of faith all the more urgent.

From 1374 he came into increasing conflict with both church and state authorities. He urged clergy to give up their riches and live in poverty, and also argued for the severing of the ties between the church and secular powers, making him unpopular with both sides.

Drawing on earlier writers such as Augustine Wyclif advocated Scripture as the guide to truth, and developed from this arguments against many practices and beliefs which had grown up in the medieval period of Christendom.

All of the portraits of Wyclif were made a considerable period after his death. About 250 copies of the “Wyclif Bible”, a translation made by a number of scholars, have survived, testimony to its impact and diffusion in an era of hand-written books.

This is the beginning of John’s Gospel from one of them on the left, and a page from a copy now in the British Library, which belonged to Thomas Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester (1355–1397), who was the youngest son of Edward III.

