



Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band

Text: Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348—c. 405)

Tune: Daniel Vetter (18th century)

One of Scripture's saddest moments is the killing of the Holy Innocents, all the boys of Bethlehem age two and younger. Herod demanded their murder when the Magi came to him, seeking the King of the Jews. Afraid of anyone else who would be known as "King of the Jews," he demanded that any boy born in the two years prior be put to death. Herod's fear shows how deep-rooted sin is, especially the sin of pride that would cause the murder of infants and toddlers. To commemorate this event, remembered in the Church Year on December 28, Aurelius Prudentius left the Church a hymn in their honor, "Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band."

Prudentius was a fourth century Christian. All that we know of his life comes from his own writings, in the form of a very brief autobiography at the start of his collection of hymns. He was born in 348 in the Roman province of Tarraconensis, now northern Spain. He was born to a Christian family with notable financial means. He received an excellent education, studied law, and held several public offices. He began his legal career as a public defender and later became a judge. Most notable, he was twice governor of his province, and finally held office in the court of Theodosius (Roman emperor 379-395). Around 392, Prudentius retired from public office and became an ascetic, a Christian who retreats from all sorts of earthly pleasures and joys to focus more on the faith. He did so lamenting the worldly lifestyle of self-gratification that marked his youth and early adulthood. While devoting himself to greater Christian piety, he set himself apart by his poetry to serve the Church. His work does much to pick up where Ambrose of Milan (339-397; author of "Savior of the Nations, Come") left off. He published all his Christian poetry in 405 in two volumes: *Liber Cathemerinon* (containing 14 hymns for all seasons) and *Liber*

Peristephanon (containing 14 hymns for saints' days). After this time nothing is heard of him. However, his works were highly prized by Luther, who desired that the works of Prudentius be studied by everyone in the schools. Additionally, Andreas Rudelbach, one of the leaders of 19th century confessional Lutheranism, said that "the poetry of Prudentius is like gold set with precious stones."

"Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band" is surprisingly not found in Prudentius's volume of saint day hymnody, but in his volume of general hymns. It is part of a 52 stanza poem entitled *Hymnus Epiphaniae*, the Hymn of Epiphany. In this poem, he summarizes the Gospel accounts of the time from the Nativity until Christ's adolescence. "Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band" is actually one of two sections of *Hymnus Epiphaniae* that are devoted to the Feast of the Holy Innocents. The second is *Audit tyrannus anxius*, "With Terror Doth the Tyrant Hear." Prudentius specified that "With Terror Doth the Tyrant Hear" was to be sung at the Office of Matins and "Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band" at the Office of Lauds.

Our translation omits one stanza of Prudentius's work, which is the original fourth stanza. It reads:

Admist that tide of infant gore
Alone He wins the sheltering shore:
The Virgin's child survives the stroke,
When every mother's heart was broke.

The imagery of the first stanza is strong, comparing Herod and his army as a "tempest" and the baby boys of Bethlehem as "rosebuds." Just as storms decimate fragile young plants, so did Herod's wrath and jealousy destroy families and young lives. But, stanza two reassures us that these victims of Herod's wrath have been transported safely to heaven, where they are near to the Lamb and follow Him wherever He goes (Rev. 14). Despite Herod's best attempts to exterminate the true King of the Jews, he was powerless to stop the Savior's path as Christ was borne away to the safety of Egypt and the fellowship of other Jews who had gone there to escape his wrath (st. 3). The hymn closes with a doxology, which is a later addition to the hymn. We praise the Lord, with these Holy Innocents, for God's mercy which belongs to them and us.