

**SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: GEOFF CHADWICK:
28/1/2025: CHRISTMAS 1A
RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN**

Matthew 2.13-18

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'

¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,

¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

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.'

Today we hear that part of the Christmas story that we might want to overlook. Whilst we like to celebrate the joy and wonder of Jesus' birth, this part, talking about the slaughter of the innocents is something we would rather ignore.

But here it is, this murderous story of a ruthless king. Sweetness and light have been replaced by the dark side of human life.

Herod's slaughter of all the little boys 2 years old and under must be understood in the context of the ruthlessness of the times. Despotic rulers were not unfamiliar to the people of Jesus' time. The rulers' obsession with power and influence often led to cruelty and murder.

Nevertheless, Herod's slaughter of young children is particularly heinous, and the only way for the holy family to survive is to take refuge in Egypt.

For Matthew, these events add to one of the theological motifs of his Gospel. Matthew, writing to a Jewish based church, paints Jesus as the "New Moses".

You may recall, that 2000 years earlier Moses' mother had concealed the infant Moses in a basket and sent him down the river to keep him safe from the murderous Pharaoh. Some of you will remember this as the "Moses in the bullrushes" story of Sunday-

school. The child is discovered floating down the river by one of Pharaoh's daughters. She then adopts him and pays his mother to nurse him.

This is how Moses got his name because Pharaoh's daughter says to herself:

"I drew him out of the water" (Ex 3:10 NRSV).

The name means "to draw out".

Matthew's parallelism, does not end here. He also draws on the story of Rachel's grief:

*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.*
(Mtt 2:18, NRSV)

In Jer 31.15, it is reported that Rachel, wife of Jacob, died in childbirth. According to Gen 35: 16-20, she was buried near Bethlehem, and Ramah was a scene of national grief.

And so, Matthew is building a case for Jesus', Jewish heritage.

Now wouldn't it be wonderful, if the era of ruthless despots and heinous acts had ended when the holy family returned from Egypt. But as we all know this is not the case. Despicable acts at the hands of power-hungry and ruthless leaders continue to be a part of human history.

We've had our own recent experience.

The massacre at Bondi beach, though not perpetrated by a despot, leaves us horrified. We, as it were, are *weeping for Rachel's children* yet again. We cannot understand how individuals can be so filled with hatred that they would murder innocent people at what was meant to be a celebration of light and hope.

We are both angered and numbed by these events.

Yes, we may demand tighter gun restrictions, and swift inquiries into the events. It is just and right to do so, but we must not forget to express our grief with our aggrieved brothers and sisters.

We, along with our fellow citizens must *weep for Rachel's children*.

The Bondi events are, not the only events of violence that flood our TV screens. Events in Palestine, the Ukraine, and in many forgotten wars grab our attention; and we weep.

Nevertheless, we must continue to be people of hope. We must continue to be captivated by the story of Jesus, whose faithful parents kept him safe in dangerous times, and raised him to be our Saviour. They did nothing miraculous other than to do what good parents do. Perhaps that's a call for us all.

To not lose hope, but to parent, Grand-parent, *uncle* and *aunt* well. To raise our children in faith and hope and love, so that goodness may overcome all evil and that love will find a way in all things.

It's not easy. Neither was it easy for Mary and Josheph. But let us, like them keep our children safe and ever seek God's Spirit in all that we do.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.