

Christmas 1 Matthew 2:13-23

Our readings around Christmas are usually a collection from all of the gospels to piece together the circumstances surrounding the birth and childhood of Jesus. It is one of the few times in the church calendar that the story is broadly in chronological order, except for this morning. In this Year A where we take our readings predominantly from the gospel of Matthew, we have jumped ahead of ourselves on the Sunday after Christmas so as to skip the story of the visit of the wise men, or Magi. This story is to be saved for Epiphany which is celebrated on 6th January or often in our churches on the nearest Sunday to 6th January.

So this has left us with a bit of a problem. In other years the readings switch to Luke as Luke has a great deal more to share about the birth of Jesus than any of the other gospel writer, but in Year A the lectionary does a slightly odd thing and tells the story of Jesus and his family escaping Herod before we have heard the story of why such an escape was necessary. So that your Epiphany is not ruined by spoilers, suffice to say the local Jewish ruler, put in place by the Roman occupying force, King Herod, was feeling threatened by the idea that someone had been born who was fulfilling prophecies that he may grow to become King of the Jews.

Herod's solution is beyond cruel and it echoes the treatment the Hebrews received at the hands of Pharaoh when they were still slaves in Egypt, it was the subjugation of a people but the brutal infanticide of their male children. In what has come to be known as the commemoration of Holy Innocents, this abhorrent act is detailed in Matthew's gospel to share with its readers a number of things. The first thing we are taught is that God's people were once again under the rule of a tyrant who was self-serving and power obsessed rather than a God fearing servant leader, caring for his people in the midst of the Roman occupation. If ever there was a time for God to act in the world, surely this was it.

The second thing we are taught in Matthew's account is that all of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, his flight to Egypt and his return to Israel were all directly linked to prophecies of the coming Messiah. In what must have always seem to scholars to have been contradictory messages, Matthew noted that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, that God's son would be called out of Egypt and that he would be called a Nazarene. On the face of it, this was impossible, how could the Messiah be from Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth, and yet Jesus fulfilled each of these prophecies in his tumultuous childhood. Does this mean that God was behind the actions of Herod, not at all, but prophecy comes from God not in that the actions of the future are bent to shape a prophecy, but rather that God is beyond time and is able to inspire others to recognise what is even before it has happened. Herod and his power grab was responsible for the massacre of the innocents, God's prophets glimpsed the guiding hand of God ensuring the safety of Jesus and the Holy Family in the midst of it.

Finally we come to learn even more about the great faith and trust that Joseph and Mary placed in God once they learned that they would care for the Messiah as their own son.

Had Joseph not heeded the word of God in his dream, he would have had no warning when the authorities came to search for Jesus. Had Mary protested that she couldn't possibly travelled to a strange country, with a different language and no family support while managing a small child, perhaps Joseph would have been persuaded that it was just a silly dream and they might have remained where they were. These parents were chosen for Jesus not because of any power or wealth they held but rather because of their faithful obedience to God in all things. This allowed them to be bold even when they were afraid, and there can be no doubt that this was frightening. Their decisive action on following God's call despite the fear and effort of their moving to Egypt as aliens and outsiders in a strange land, is testament to a depth of faith which is wonderful.

But the most important message we can take from today's gospel is the message of hope wrapped up in that baby as he grew and matured. God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to be amongst us. God so loved the world that he trusted his son to faithful people who would raise him from humble beginnings. God's power and influence on Jesus' life was unmistakable from the beginning – so powerful was Jesus that from his birth those in power were afraid of who he would grow to be to the point of doing the unspeakable to try to stop him, but God persisted and love won. This is the hope of Jesus, that corrupt power can be overcome by perfect love. It is easy to feel sorry for the Holy Family as they escape to Egypt, but they are not to be pitied, rather they are an example of strength in adversity and faith in the God of hope. May we all be open to hear God's call for us in the midst of our struggles, trusting that God's plan for us will take us beyond what we could ever hope to achieve alone.