

God in the real world

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on 30th December 2007, by Rev'd Pauline Main, based on Matthew 2:13-23.

Matthew 2:13-23

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 fulfill 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."

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarene."

Sermon

Our violent world - then and now.

This passage about the massacre of the innocents by Herod doesn't fit into our sometimes cosy image of the Christmas story. There are no Christmas cards about it, though it does get a mention in one or two carols.

It's tempting for worship leaders to avoid this story and focus on something else on the Sunday after Christmas. I was tempted to do that - and then the events this week turned me back to the passage.

Here in the gospel story we have someone using violent means to try to achieve his ends. This particular massacre isn't mentioned in historical records, but Herod's ruthlessness in relation to rivals is well documented - he murdered three of his own sons as well as many supposed conspirators. He would not have hesitated to murder a few children to further his cause.

The story rings true - it accords with what we know about the world, as we've seek only this week - things haven't changed, have they? The assassination of Benazir

Bhutto reminds us - if we needed reminding - that there continue to be those who use violence and terror to get their way.

Mrs Bhutto was not an innocent child, not an innocent at all. She was a politician with a flawed record, but she was a threat to some of her opponents, by her links to the West and her commitment at least in her words, to democracy.

Jesus throughout his life was seen by some as a threat. Here to Herod," Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews" ask the wise men. Not very wise. No leader wants to hear of a rival (read our own history! I've just been reading a novel about Lady Jane Gray, one pretender to the throne of England who was disposed of.) Jesus was a threat to Herod, as he was later a threat to the religious leaders - he challenged their authority.

This sadly, is the reality of the world. And there are other contemporary parallels, for our world is full of refugees, fleeing from terror like Joseph, Mary and the child

This is the world into which the Christ child is born. Into which God comes. I can draw out from it the picture of God amongst us - God willing to come into this wicked world and engage with it, and be put at risk by it. Immanuel, God with us.

What is Matthew saying?

That's the message I take from the story. But - what is Matthew saying?

The Old Testament scriptures were very important to the gospel writers. They saw Jesus as the Messiah who was the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. This is particularly true of Matthew, who may have been writing for communities of Jewish converts to Christianity, who were being pressurised, even persecuted, by the Jewish community that they have left.

So Matthew emphasises the ways in which Jesus fulfils the Jewish scriptures - their new faith is not a denial of Judaism, but its fulfilment, he is saying.

One of Matthew's themes is to link Jesus to the experiences of Moses and the Israelites.

"Joseph ... took the child and his mother ... and went to Egypt .. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'" *[Matthew 2:14-15]*

The link perhaps sounds a bit contrived to us – Jesus being taken into Egypt in order to be called back. But the verses are from the words of the prophet a quotation which refers to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt -

"When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt have I called my son" [Hosea 11:1].

So, Matthew is saying that just as Israel was delivered from Egypt, so would the Messiah deliver them again, and bring salvation to his people.

And there are allusions in the text to the life of Moses, which Matthew's readers would have noticed -

- Herod's massacre of the innocents is reminiscent of Pharaoh killing the male children of the Hebrew slaves - and Jesus, like Moses, had to be protected.
- Joseph is instructed to go back home with Jesus once those who have sought the child's life are dead; just as Moses can return to Egypt once those who have sought to kill him are dead.

Again the message is one of deliverance – just like Moses, Jesus will be the saviour of his people.

Where is God? - Rachel's lament

In all of this, God's plan is being fulfilled, implies Matthew. The child is kept safe, for the work which is to come.

But we might want to say that other children are not safe -

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
... Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." *[Matthew 2:18]*

These warning words – which are from the prophet Jeremiah - do come true.
Not because God wills it so, but because of human action.

Evil people strike out to further their own ends - and others are caught in the backlash. Innocent babies, innocent onlookers in our own day - 20 or so others in the suicide bombing which took place at the same time as the killing of Mrs Bhutto, and many others in the violence since.

Hope

Where is God's place in this then?

The words of Rachel are in a section of Jeremiah which is otherwise full of hope, and which is about the return of the people of Israel from their enforced exile in Babylon.

¹⁵ Thus says the LORD:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD:

Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for there is a reward for your work,
says the LORD:

they shall come back from the land of the enemy;

¹⁷ there is hope for your future,

says the LORD:
your children shall come back to their own country. [*Jeremiah 31:15-17*]

and - that same chapter includes the words about the new covenant which God will make with his people. Perhaps Matthew intended people also to find these more positive associations.

In Matthew's gospel the passage is also set in a context of hope - the Messiah will restore his people.

Rachel's weeping is not "in order to fulfil" what is in scripture. It happens, as the prophet predicted, because of human action.

But - God is able to work through disaster to blessing, through death to life.

We wish it were not that way round.

It seems to be how God works. We see evidence of it in the scriptures – supremely in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Perhaps it is how God has to work - a consequence of allowing our human free will which brings so much disaster and pain.

This takes us back to my emphasis of God with us in the midst of our wicked world.

The Christmas message – "Immanuel", God with us.

God not just "engaging with" the world, as I said, but offering us the means of salvation.

God as it were is "taking responsibility" for the world he has made and the way it is, and offering us a way beyond the pain to new life in him.

The influence of the past

A final point.

I was struck by one biblical commentator's remarks that Matthew in his use of Old Testament scripture acknowledges that the past helps to shape the present.

This is true not just in the history of Israel.

Think how many lives of people and nations have been shaped by the past of this country (eg slavery, Middle East - creation of state of Israel, Empire).

I've been talking about events in Pakistan. I don't know much about the history of British rule in the Indian sub continent, but we helped to shape its future. We allowed the partitioning along religious lines, into what are now India and Pakistan. We have some responsibility for those nations.

Our actions and intentions in our dealing with others were good and bad. In recent times there have been some apologies for the bad (though hindsight is a wonderful thing!). These apologies are a way of recognising that how things are now is in part because of what was done in the past, and acknowledging our responsibility.

At Christmas we often think of our own past - we meet up with those we perhaps don't see often, we get in touch with folk who are part of our past "story".

Our present - for good or ill - is influenced by what has gone before, by others who have influenced our lives.

We need to acknowledge that - as Matthew acknowledges it in his gospel.

But also - we cannot just "blame" the past, we cannot just "blame" God - we have responsibility for our own actions.

God takes responsibility for his world by coming amongst us in the child of Bethlehem.

He offers us salvation - deliverance from all that holds us captive, including the past.

But we have to do our part, accept God's gift - and move on.