

## Christmas 1A

Sometimes the church, like Jesus, turns things on their head. Today's lectionary gospel reading, sometimes known as 'the slaughter of the innocents' and sometimes as 'The flight to Egypt', appears in Matthew's gospel after the so-called wise men finally find Jesus in the stable, having followed the star and after very unwisely having stopped off in Jerusalem to ask King Herod, of all people, where they might find the rival to his throne. Yet the story of these, in my view, misnamed wise men comes next week in the lectionary!

So today it's this terrible story of how King Herod ordered the slaughter of baby boys in Jerusalem and how Joseph, Mary and Jesus became refugees, asylum seekers in Egypt. This story only appears in Matthew's gospel and we have a three year lectionary, based on the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke respectively and guess what, right now we're in the year where we look at Matthew's gospel, so I'm the unfortunate soul who has to cope with this most dreadful story which occurs so early in the life of Jesus.

Really I don't know what to say about Herod. He was a wicked king, who was responsible for so many deaths during his reign, including thousands of people he didn't know at all and also those closest to him, his wife and three of his sons, all to ensure he retained his power unchallenged. Power mattered to Herod more than anything, or anybody else. What a contrast to Joseph, who plays a big part in this reading, as he makes sure he looks after his wife, Mary and young son. We don't hear much about Joseph in any of the gospels. We are not told of any word he ever uttered. But he appears in a favourable light whenever we see him. For instance, he stands by Mary when she is expecting a baby and then he comes into his own again in this story, as a direct contrast to Herod. Power is not a word I would associate with Joseph, as I do with Herod – as Joseph never seems to be a person with power, not in the sense that we might normally refer to power. He is constantly the victim of circumstances. However, I think we do well to take time to consider Joseph, to see if we can learn anything from him. And maybe also, it's not a bad idea after all to be considering this story the week before the so-called wise men

take centre stage, for next week it will be next year, 2014. Might it not be a good idea to consider this story in which Joseph plays a big part to see if there might be any lessons we could take with us into next year?

Mary and Joseph are having a bad time of it. They are commanded to return to the place of Joseph's birth, which is Bethlehem, for the census and this is at the time that Mary is due to give birth. They have to make do with staying in a dirty, smelly stable, which was probably in a cave in the hillside and there Mary gives birth. Now it's past Christmas I can ask you to forget the idyllic nativity images – really it would have been pretty miserable. I'm sure I read somewhere that if they'd been women coming to see the baby Jesus, rather than so-called wise men, let's call them magi, I'm sure I've read that if they'd been wise women, they would have asked directions from somebody more reliable than a wicked King, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought much more practical gifts. I have to say that I wouldn't qualify as a wise woman if it means cleaning a stable and making a casserole. But, you know, the magi don't actually do anything to improve conditions for Mary, Joseph and Jesus unless you count the gifts they bring. The fact is that because they stopped off on their journey to ask Herod where they might find this new king, they are indirectly responsible for Mary, Joseph and Jesus becoming asylum seekers in Egypt and for Herod's terrible edict that all baby boys in Bethlehem should be killed.

Anyway, apart from the company Mary and Joseph had when the shepherds and wise men came to visit, it must have been pretty awful. Mary and Joseph must have been looking forward to returning to their home, to familiar places, familiar people but then Joseph has a dream. Traditionally dreams and the appearance of angels in the scriptures indicate God communicating with men and women. Angels are messengers from God. We are to understand that Joseph was convinced that God had told him to take Mary and Jesus and flee from Bethlehem, nay, from the country, to Egypt to save the life of Jesus. Joseph does not hesitate. Now you'd really think he'd have had enough by now: Mary telling him she was pregnant, having to travel to Bethlehem for the census, the only place to stay being a smelly stable and Mary giving birth in it and

now instead of returning home, Joseph is certain that God is telling them they have to become refugees. But Joseph does exactly what God tells him. He obeys God, and he obeys God, because he trusts God. Herod, by contrast, trusted nobody. Maybe Joseph thought of the words of Psalm 31 as he prepared to flee with Mary and Jesus. He would have been very familiar with the Psalms, the hymn book, if you like of his people, the Jews. In Psalm 31, v14 we read the psalmist saying, 'I trust in you, O Lord; I say, You are my God', followed by, 'My times are in your hand'.

'My times are in your hand'. Yes, **my** times, yours and mine. The whole of our life is made up of a succession of times, and these times are immensely varied. It's all part of life's rich pattern, as my grandma would say. You remember the words from the book of Ecclesiastes, which were made into a well known folk song, 'there is a time for everything under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot', and so on. And it's true that life seems to be like that. We experience all sorts of different times, good times and bad, easy times and hard times. For poor old Joseph, most of his times seem to be troublesome. For us, there are the times when all goes smoothly, hopefully and then the times when nothing seems to be going well. Our days are made up of sunshine and shadow and we don't know what each day will bring. But in the midst of all the uncertainty we have the assurance that our times, whatever they may be, are in God's hand. There is no better place for us to be than that, in the hand of a good and wise God. 'My times are in your hand'. That includes the times of adversity, as well as prosperity; it includes the times of failure as well as success; it includes the times of illness as well as of health. It includes the times of grief as well as of happiness. We can trust God with all our times. We can trust that he will be with us, laughing and crying with us and supporting us through good or ill. Joseph understood that. He trusted God.

Like Joseph, we do not know what the future holds for us, what next year may bring. For some of us there may be testing times; times of suffering; times of crisis. We do not know but this we do know; that come what may, our times are in God's hand, in the strong hand of a loving God whom we can trust completely. Our times may vary but his loving care is constant. It never changes.

Joseph believed that and it is the one thing we can be certain of for the coming year.

King George VI quoted these words of Louise Haskins during one of his Christmas broadcasts amidst the dark days of the last world war:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put thine hand into the hand of God. That shall be to Thee better than light and safer than a known way'.

So we should go forward with God, just as Joseph did and just as the magi finally did when they stopped relying either on their horoscopes, or on the evil King Herod. Remember, they did finally heed God and returned home a different way, having been advised by God to do so, to protect the infant Christ. So, in trusting God, whom they perhaps barely knew, those magi also stepped into the unknown but with God.

There's something else we can say about Joseph, I think that is worth remarking on, apart from the trust he had in God. The troubles that we read about in the scriptures, that Joseph faced in life were not of his own making. Mary being pregnant, the journey to Bethlehem for the census, Herod feeling threatened and taking this out on all Bethlehem's baby boys and then later, with Mary, searching for Jesus who gets lost when the family are celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem. Poor Joseph seems to have been the unfortunate victim of circumstances. He does nothing wrong, it seems, but is dealt a tough hand in life. Can you identify with that? 'Why me?', we cry out when beset by problems and life is such that next year will probably bring their fair share of them.

Thinking globally, there are still countless problems in Afghanistan. The people of Syria are suffering from opposing factions in their country. There is unrest in parts of Africa. These situations, in turn, give rise to food shortages and starvation amongst thousands of people. The effects of climate change seem to increase day by day. Just as Mary and Joseph had to flee with the baby Jesus to escape from Herod so it is likely that political

refugees will continue to pour over borders seeking a life free from war or persecution. The prospects do not look good for next year, as we look around us, do they? We have to admit that.

So much of what may happen in the future is out of our control, as it was out of Joseph's but we can control the way we react to it. This is where we can take charge. Joseph knew this and through his trust in God his reactions were such that ultimately the Son of God was, in due course, able to enter into his ministry. Joseph played such a big but quiet, unassuming part in enabling this to happen. Can you maybe remember situations in your own life when it is only now, looking back that you realise how important was the action you took at the time? You may have been unsure whether it was the right thing to do. It was an act of faith and only later have you seen God's hand in it, God's purpose being served through your trust in God.

You know this must have been what the disciples experienced as they became the back bone of the early church. They must have looked back at the model they had, a model we know so well and realised God's hand at work.... think - a man betrayed by a close comrade; tried for offences against a religion to which he passionately adhered and then suffering public execution. That was the life of Jesus, wasn't it? All this would seem to account for a disastrous life, wouldn't it, one of abject failure. Nothing went right, it would appear. But when the man, as a victim, seems to accept this suffering with inner serenity and outward dignity, as a voluntary act of sacrifice, then tragedy is transformed into triumph, defeat becomes victory, death becomes resurrection. That is how Jesus dealt with the situation he found himself in. Victim turned victor.

When we read this story of the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and the slaughter of baby boys by Herod, it's so obvious who has the upper hand. Herod holds all the cards. He's the one with all the power which causes the family to flee. But that's the short term view. God is in it with us for the long haul. God thinks long term. God thinks in terms of his kingdom being established and that happening through people like Joseph trusting him and playing their part. Oh, and then there's us – you and me. God wants us to join him too in working towards his kingdom being

established. To do this we must trust him, like Joseph and then the way we deal with adversity can become so much more significant than the troubles that may beset us.

If you think about it – in general we are trusting people. We quite easily trust complete strangers – people we've never met before. There are those who so unexpectedly help us out when we're struggling. The person I trusted to help me change the wheel when I had a puncture. Well, he didn't help me – he did the whole job. Then there were the nursery workers into whose hands I placed the care of our young sons while my husband and I were at work. The window cleaner, who broke into my Mum's house for her when she'd locked herself out. The surgeon who operated on you perhaps. You can think of your own examples.

We really manage to trust a lot of people who we don't know but when it comes to God, it's a different story. Yet we can know an awful lot about God, who is all that is good and only wants what's best for us, who loves us unconditionally, whose constant presence we can count on. Isaiah knew all about God. We heard his testimony to the God in whom he believed in our first reading. Yet, somehow, although we might trust all sorts of people that we don't know at all, or barely know - when it comes to God, somehow, trust can be found wanting and I count myself in there. We need to re-think that, so let us, as we approach a new year, resolve to have that trust that Joseph had in God, nay the trust that Jesus had in his father, for as we place ourselves in his hands and learn to trust his promises, we will grow in knowledge, understanding and love of God and in so doing we will undoubtedly catch glimpses of his kingdom on earth and what can be better than that?

Happy new year.