

Into out of Egypt

29 12 13

Almighty God,
who wonderfully created us in your own image
and yet more wonderfully restored us
through your Son Jesus Christ:
grant that as he came to share our humanity
so we may share in the life of his divinity.

Our text today may be found in Matthew chapter 2 and verse 13:

'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.'

Silence. Do you ever notice what's not there ? It's much harder to spot what's not than what is in front of our eyes. Today's passage from Matthew chapter 2 brings his account of the birth and childhood of Jesus to a close. By the time, Matthew picks up the narrative at the start of chapter 3 with an account of John the Baptist and then of Jesus' baptism, we will have leapt over nearly three decades of Jesus' life without a word ! The silence is fascinating. I wonder why.

Today's gospel falls into three parts:

- The flight to Egypt
- The massacre of the Innocents
- The return to Nazareth

So let's look at each in turn.

It begins with Joseph having a second dream in which an angel of the Lord appears him. Again, the angel is unnamed. Again, I'd like to think it was Gabriel. Again, I wonder why only Mary knows the angel's name which, in the context of the shepherds and here with Joseph, we don't. His dream is a warning – get up and go because Herod is out to have the child killed. Without hesitation, immediately, Joseph does as he is told. Even though it's still night, they go. And there they stay until it's safe to return.

The middle section is about the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. Bethlehem was not that big a place. The number of children aged 2 or younger killed is estimated to be around 20 or 30. In the context of the killings going on in Syria over the past couple of years not that many. But it is indicative of how evil and paranoid Herod the Great was. He is the king and no one, not even members of his own family, will be allowed to challenge his authority. Such a man would not hesitate or have any qualms about ordering their death. And killing people is, I'm afraid, one of the things soldiers do for a living.

The third section is their return from Egypt. Herod the Great died in 4BC so Jesus was certainly not born 1AD ! At this point in time, precise dating of the event is impossible. Certainly, Jesus is back in Nazareth before the age of twelve. The decision Joseph and Mary took was not to return to Bethlehem but to go back to Nazareth – and the rest is, as they say, history.

But before I stop this morning, let me draw your attention to one of the distinctive features of Matthew's gospel: his use of proof texts from the Old Testament.

Why, I ask myself, should Matthew want to cite evidence from the Old Testament ? The simple answer is that Matthew is writing his gospel for a Jewish audience, for Jews who had become followers of the way, the first Christians. To them, the fact that Jesus was fulfilling their scriptures would have been a source of real encouragement and add to their conviction that Jesus was in fact their Messiah.

The first is a reference to Hosea 11 v1. It's a beautiful, poetic passage and it makes me want to cry – the picture of God calling his son out of Egypt:

When Israel was a child, I loved him
and out of Egypt I called my son.

It's part of the salvation history of the Jews and affirms the covenant relationship between God and his Chosen People, the Children of Israel. Matthew is using it to refer to Jesus, given he's coming home from a stay in Egypt – neat ?

The second is a reference to Jeremiah 31v15. The text is part of a poem, here in particular where a mother grieves for her dead children:

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.

The reference is to the exile of the Children of Israel to Babylon. It's a poem, a vision of the possible lament of Rachel, the by then long-dead wife of the patriarch Jacob, who is 'heard' to weep for her dead 'children'. You can feel the

echo the passage must have had in Matthew's mind with those slaughtered children in and around Bethlehem.

The third, 'He will be called a Nazorean', may refer to Isaiah 11 v 1:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse

And a branch shall grow out of its roots

Believe it or not, 'Nazorean' is a possible pun in Hebrew on 'nazir', the word for a branch and be a reference to the fact that Jesus, like his ancestor King David, is descended from Jesse, as such he is a branch of their family's tree.

But whatever we may think of the way Matthew and his readers made sense of scripture, these proof texts were encouraging and convincing to them.

So let me leave you with the story of Jesus' early life that I find frustratingly short on detail. We know so little of his actual life, just the pictures that emerge from each of four gospels. Proof texts are meant to be convincing. For me, what is truly convincing is how a familiar story can touch me again and again with the truth of what it embodies.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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G: Sermons 29 : Egypt

