

Sermon for Year A 29 December 2019 1st Sunday of Christmas
Readings: Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 2:10-18 & Matthew 2:13-23

Theme: Jesus vs Herod, king of life vs king of death.

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen, please sit down.

It always comes as a shock how quickly the normality of life returns after the huge build-up to Christmas. Suddenly, just as you feel you can't face another turkey sandwich, or another rendition of Slade, normality returns.

Everything that has been building and building since August to the climax of Christmas Day...and then.....

We come Church today and hear about the dark side of Christmas, and make no mistake, it is indeed a dark reading in our Gospel today.

We get this reading every three years when the lectionary brings us up sharp, like a wet flannel in the face of a hangover as we move from the cuddly birth of a baby surrounded by sheep and a donkey to a reading that speaks of death, violence and persecution.

Our reading today is out of chronological order if you read from the Bible, because today's reading takes place after the visit of the wise men or Magi, the travellers from the East. We will celebrate their arrival on the feast of Epiphany next Sunday. These wise men learnt from their star charts that a king was to be born in or near Jerusalem and they had travelled long distances to meet him. Unfortunately, we read they went to Herod, the king, to enquire where this baby might be, and that was the deadly mistake, enquiring of Herod, because Herod got jealous and ordered the slaughter of all babies and infants under 2 years old, forcing Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt where the little family were homeless and refugees.

What do we know of King Herod?

Firstly, this was not the King Herod who we will read later in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 14, imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist. He was one of the sons of this Herod, this Herod was known as Herod the Great, a title he may well have created himself. He was 'the King of the Jews' although he wasn't a Jewish born king. He was an Edomite from the region near the Dead Sea, in today's south Eastern Jordan. A friend of Julius Caesar, He was installed as king over the Jews by Rome. A puppet king, as long as he did what Rome asked, he had free reign and power, and that power allowed him to put to death anyone he wished.... history archives tell how he put to death 3 of his own sons when he thought they were after his throne, and apparently, he dictated that, upon his death, one member of every Jewish family was to be killed, that way he reasoned everyone would be mourning...

So, it is no surprise that we read that he decided to put to death every baby and infant under 2 years old in Bethlehem. We recall undertones in this story from the second book of the Old Testament, Exodus and Moses being saved when the Jewish babies in Egypt were killed by Pharaoh. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience and it has been said that this event didn't really happen, and Matthew added this story to show how Jesus was the new Moses.

I understand that Bethlehem at the time was home to around 1,000 residents, about the size that Weston was in the 2011 census, so it's likely that there were not that many babies in the town, which perhaps is why the history books do not record this act of murder by Herod.

Matthew then quotes- from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, chapter 31,
“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.”

If we read the first book of the Bible, Genesis 35, We will note that Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph (he of technicolour coat fame) dies giving birth to Benjamin somewhere along the road from Bethel to Bethlehem. Before she dies, she is comforted with the news that she is having another son.

Genesis 35 says that Rachel was buried on the way to Bethlehem, perhaps at Ramah, birthplace of the prophet Samuel. This would seem to indicate that Rachel actually died in the vicinity of Ramah. Also, later, at the time of the Prophets, the Israelite exiles were gathered at Ramah before their long walk to exile in Babylon.

These facts might explain the connection Matthew saw between Ramah and Bethlehem: Rachel died near one while traveling toward the other. Perhaps, maybe she weeps at Ramah because she is buried there, and she weeps over the gathering of the Israelites as they leave for Babylon and then at what is happening in Bethlehem.

This is a hard passage to read so close to Christmas. We must remember the readings of Midnight Mass and Christmas morning from John 1 about the light shining in the darkness and we can compare this light, the light from the King of life, the baby in the manger, Jesus, son of God, our saviour to the darkness surrounding the king of death – Herod. Who to follow – you choose - the life giver or the life taker?

The Gospel reading also brings back into focus Joseph, husband of Mary.

Joseph listened to God, firstly, he was told how Mary would have a baby before he married her and was thinking if dismissing her but was told in a dream how the child would be holy and so he married Mary and took her with him to Bethlehem for the census.

So, after the birth and all those visitors, and queuing to register their details on the census, I imagine they were getting ready to pack-up and return home.

Just one more night's sleep before that journey back...and then, Joseph has another dream, or message from God telling him they are in danger and to take his little family to Egypt and safety. So, he broke the news to Mary and off they went... he put distance between Jesus and Herod, light and dark.

They flee as refugees. We imagine they were welcomed and set-up home in Egypt where they built a life, perhaps in a village where Joseph worked for the local carpenter. I wonder though what really happened, did they go from village to village before being accepted?

How do we welcome new people into our town today?

After an undisclosed period of time, Joseph is again told by God that Herod is dead and to return to Israel and so they start another journey, go back and they settle in Nazareth.

Joseph chose to listen to, and obey God. He didn't decide to stay and take his chance with Herod, he did as God asked, and, in doing so saved his family.

Who will you choose?

In our Christian faith, there is no sitting on the fence, no middle ground, we need to choose who we will follow:

Jesus, the innocent baby in the manger or Herod, the murderer, jealous puppet king?

Will you be like Joseph listening, trusting and acting on God's word, or Herod, focusing on his own self-importance, assuming he has the right to do whatever he wanted?

Our challenge from this passage is to question how we should each go forward, can we focus on the baby and listen, and perhaps act on Gods instructions or will we turn away and think only of ourselves and tell ourselves how wonderful we are.

As we approach a new decade, 2020 and say goodbye to 2019, I pray that we will all have a blessed and peaceful new year and be given the strength to make the right decisions whatever situations confront us.

Amen.

1330 words