

CHRISTMAS 1
26/12/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 63:7-9

Psalm 148

Hebrew 2:10-18

Matthew 2:13-23

The flight to Egypt: escape death to endure death; companions of all who suffer

When we come to this day the options are to celebrate St Stephen's Day, which is about the death of the first Christian Martyr, or if we are in the Year of Matthew, the reading includes the flight into Egypt and reference to the massacre of the Innocents. Often people are shocked by this sudden shift into stories of terror and death and wonder what it has to do with Christmas.

The text from Matthew is typically restrained. And yet in the history of art, and in the traditions of the church, the flight into Egypt has inspired many additional stories and some beautiful works of art. Just as early depictions of the crucifixion emphasised Jesus' victory and enthronement more than his suffering, early writings and depictions of the flight into Egypt stressed its triumphal nature rather than threat that prompted it. An example of this comes from the 8th Century Gospel of Pseudo Matthew, which includes stories of lions and leopards wagging their tails and treating Jesus with great reverence, going before him on his way. The one I like best is about how the baby Jesus used his power to shorten the way through the scorching desert so that a thirty-day stretch could be done in a single day!

The beauty of the pictures and the fantastic nature of the stories meant something to people at the time. They wanted to highlight the drama of God with us. But to us the triumphal note tends to hide the other drama in the story. These people were on the run because their neighbourhood had become unsafe. Terror was abroad as it is for many in the world today, and the holy family were in fear of their lives. They had a safe passage but for us it raises a question: what does it mean that they survived, apparently by the will of God, but so many other innocent lives were lost?

It is impossible to understand Matthew without reflecting on earlier Hebrew traditions. Joseph means may God add posterity and Joseph the son of Isaac was a dreamer whose gift of interpretation enabled him to preserve the life of many in Egypt, and amongst his own people. Both Josephs were attentive to the will of God in their dreams, and their obedience enabled many others to experience grace. Isaiah speaks of God who carried the people and the first Joseph "carried" Israel into refuge in Egypt. With this in mind a 16th century Ethiopian Icon of the holy family pictures Jesus on the shoulders of Joseph the carpenter. What it means is that Jesus embodies the people of Israel, carried to safety by a father obedient to the prompting of God through his dreams. On this occasion, as on two others, Joseph's willing response to the message that came through his intuitions enabled God's work to go forward.

Then there is the question of the land itself. For the first Joseph Egypt became the place of generous hospitality. As we know, after his death a change of regime meant a shift in ethos. What had been a haven became a place of slavery and oppression. The once welcome guests became feared aliens and to protect himself, Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn males at birth. The proposed commemorative

sculpture for the 150th of the Congregation celebrates how the midwives, helped by others, thwarted Pharaoh's death dealing designs, preserved Moses' life, paving the way for him to emerge and lead the people to freedom. There are strong links between these two stories.

The saga of the second Joseph restores Egypt to its place as the land of refuge, a theme that is taken up in art which shows the family arriving to be welcomed by a woman, named Egyptica. In this we are drawn to see that the sovereignty of God transcends the limits we set. The world belongs to God, the earth and all its people, and one race is not forever cast in the role of the oppressor. The Coptic Christians of Egypt have not forgotten their land's role as a place of refuge. The places where, according to ancient traditions, Jesus and his parents were welcomed and rested are still well known. And the faith of that church is expressed in a prayer written by a Coptic Christian:

My Egyptian heart longs, O my God, for the redemption of my people. It has been our shame that the oppression of the Pharaohs drove the children of Israel to the sea. But you, my God, who free us from our sins, you who make all things new, chose this same country as a shelter for the Holy Family, and a home to that One who was persecuted and oppressed that we might have life and have it abundantly... I continue to praise you, my Saviour and Redeemer, who take us out of the darkness into your marvellous light.

The story of the flight to Egypt includes a quote about the call out of Egypt. At this point there are strong verbal links between this Exodus story and Matthew 2 and we cannot avoid the theological point: in Jesus Israel relives its past, he is the second Moses, and in him the Exodus story is transformed into a new act of Divine, saving, creativity.

With all this in mind, what are we really dealing with here? In the first place the message is that God works amongst us to nurture and save: to lift us up and carry us to a new dimension of life, as reflected in the reading from Isaiah. And God's nurturing is reflected in the ways of the Messiah, because a shepherd is needed, not a ravager. That brings us to the second point. Herod's murderous designs show that, from the very beginning, God's action in the world evokes hostility amongst the powerful and attracts the darkest and most violent atrocities. The shadow that falls here is a premonition of the Passion to come. As people who seek to engage with the mission of God in the world we must note this well. People will not necessarily welcome what we want to bring; they will be hostile and resist, for a large number of reasons, but not least because what we are witness to is something that calls into question the power relations in the world. Thirdly, Jesus escapes the violence at the start, but the flight and his taking refuge is not a matter of privilege. His escape is for a larger calling in which he does indeed make the long, parched journey to the cross, where the offering of his life to God is perfected in profound suffering. That he is born into an unsafe neighbourhood, and lived as one so threatened and vulnerable, means that he is a companion with all who suffer, whether as refugees who have had the rules changed on them, or those who flee the murderous designs of others in Africa or the Middle East, or as families who have lost innocent members in cruel and even violent circumstances.

So this is the day after Christmas and the horrors perpetrated by Herod enter our conversations through Matthew's Gospel. We could dumb it down - make it neat and nice by eliminating the verses that talk about infanticide. But we should keep Herod in the story, perhaps not as a figure around the crib, but he has a place in the shadows at a distance. His presence is part of the real context of Jesus' world - and our life - and there is good news here. God's love for the world, revealed in Jesus Christ, comes to us

in the midst of earth's utmost pain: its rejection, betrayal, scandal and violent killing. A Christmas which had God among us under different conditions could not really be happy. That God comes to us in the depth of human rejection and unbelief is the sure sign that we are forgiven. Only so is there a new possibility of life for us all.