

Christmas 1
26/12/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 63:7 - 9

Psalms 148

Hebrews 2:10 - 18

Matthew 2:13 - 23

The light that exposes the darkness

Hard on the heels of Christmas the texts lead us into unpopular territory. The flight into Egypt includes the horrific story of the slaughter in Bethlehem, causing us to wonder why it appears so close to the joy and wonder of the feast of the Incarnation.

Advent, Christmas and Epiphany are seasons, which celebrate the coming of light into the world, light that exposes the darkness. Cruelty and death travel in the wake of the star that beckons to this birth. Jesus was born into the real world and this prefigures his own suffering and death at the hands of the powers.

Matthew's narrative is designed to show that Jesus' life is a recapitulation of Israel's journey into Egypt and the Exodus home. Read this way Jesus emerges in Matthew's text as the second Moses who comes forward to lead the people to life. Herod is Pharaoh, the death-dealing ruler whose priorities are completely at odds with the Magi, heathen foreigners who came from afar to worship. The Sculpture at the front of the church depicts the story of how Pharaoh decreed all Hebrew boys born in Egypt should be killed in order to effect population control over an immigrant group whose presence he had come to fear. As in Egypt so here life is preserved, not through the machinations of government or military strength, but through God's gentle saving presence and the faithfulness of humble people. More than once Joseph the carpenter paid heed to the word of God that came to him in his dreams and the saving power of God won through, just as the dreams of Joseph of technicolour dream coat fame preserved the lives of many during the crisis of a famine in the region.

Herod is a man who values his power and does all he can to hold onto it. Hearing news of a possible contender he resorts to a list of unbecoming behaviours: treachery, false piety, and the final totalitarian solution. He maintains his supremacy regardless of the collateral damage. This is tyranny and destruction, for the sake of the egotistical needs of a leader with a reputation for fratricide. This is a bleak representation of what can happen when the ruling authority is not open to revelation and chooses to stay on top at all costs. Worldly power is contrasted with the gracious deeds of God who comes to us as a child: unarmed love that engages with Israel's faith and demonstrates how God continues to lift and carry us as of old. In the end Herod is a dead king. The subversive power of God preserved the life he resented, a life that eventually did suffer in gentleness to offer the world a new beginning.

Matthew tells us a lot about worldly power and Godly power. Firstly God does not come amongst us in imposing splendour, and does not use power to eradicate the opposition. The strength of God comes to us as one of us, in a baby enfolded in the arms of a woman and treasured in his family. 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. As the story of Jesus unfolds, God's nurturing is reflected in the way he works because a shepherd is not one who ravages the flock.

Secondly Herod's murderous designs show that from the very beginning God's action in the world evokes dark hostility amongst the powerful. The shadow that falls here is a premonition of the Passion, in which Jesus is totally vulnerable, before Pilate, and on the cross.

As people who seek to engage with the mission of God in the world we must note this. People will not necessarily welcome what we want to bring; for a large number of reasons they will resist, 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.

On the day after Christmas we could dumb down Matthew's story, or leave it out all together but our lectionary keeps Herod in, 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 that had God coming amongst us under different conditions would not have the potential to be really happy. But God comes to us in the depth of human rejection and unbelief, a sign that we are understood as we really are. That makes it all the more wonderful - miraculous even- that God has turned towards us to lift us up to life. Thanks be to God.
