

The 5<sup>th</sup> of February marks 40 years since we were ordained/commissioned/inducted on a very hot Ashburton summer's night in 1977. My enduring memory of that night is kneeling for what seemed a very, very long time (not sure how that would go today) while sweat was trickling down my back – a deeply spiritual memory. So we plan to be in Ashburton that day to express our gratitude to the Lord for this journey, this privilege.

I felt our Christmas services were among the best we've had (and we've had some great ones) – the most visitors; lots of variety, planning, work and thought went into them; well done to Claire, Heidi, Karene, Erin, the musical teams, the kitchen team, the invitation deliverers and many others – it was a great way to conclude the year.

We've some real stars among the children (one twinkled actually); and - an innkeeper, a Mary, a Joseph, shepherds, cows, sheep and angels – you name it, they were there; and POP UP people. It was all fine. Unlike the carol, little baby Jesus did cry. I've always felt the author of 'Away in a Manger' hadn't had much to do with new born babies before composing the words. By the way which carol is number 1 in the world?

Talking of babies crying, I've never seen a more alert new-born baby as Celia Anne was on Wednesday – I'm expecting her to talk next week and walk the week after..... Aren't some grandparents unbearable?

Today the Christmas story comes crashing down. Life breaks in and our text has an incredibly contemporary ring about it. It's like the world of 2017 is pushing in on our story, the wonderful Christmas story of the Saviour born in absolute simplicity and poverty.

### **Matthew 2:13-13**

**<sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.'**

**<sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'**

**<sup>16</sup> When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.**

**<sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:**

**<sup>18</sup> 'A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.'**

**<sup>19</sup> After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.'**

**21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, 23 and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.**

Refugees, child massacres, power obsessed leaders, vicious behaviour – this reads like current news websites and papers all over the world. And this is the world in which Jesus spent his formative months and years.

I think this morning I'd simply like to comment on some aspects of the text.

### **JOSEPH'S DREAMS**

This seems to be the way God dealt with Joseph over these momentous years; but it's not quite dreams perhaps as we have them – an angel of the Lord appeared. Maybe we can take from this the thought that God speaks to us when there's nothing else cluttering our minds – maybe it's a 21<sup>st</sup> century way of looking at this text, but many have their attention so focussed on the phone, the computer, or TV - or whatever, to really hear from God – and I include myself in this. To be in the place where God can speak significant messages into our spirits is an important place to be. It certainly got Joseph's attention.

I understand that in many places today God speaks to people through dreams, not only but particularly to followers of Islam. Dreams aren't an unusual way for God to communicate.

### **THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT**

Joseph and Mary were refugees, sent by the Lord to a place and a people where they wouldn't understand the language, the customs and the religious practices of those around them. Just like the Syrians who've come to Dunedin. That's why I loved the concert of hope, and I trust it won't be the last time we attempt to welcome these people into our community. Jesus' family knew what it was like to be a refugee. They must have found a welcome and a home.

Of course Matthew, writing for his largely Jewish audience saw the connection with Hosea 11. **'Out of Egypt I called my son.'**

### **HEROD!**

Matthew mentions Herod's carnage up front, right at the beginning of Jesus' earthly life; even then the baby Jesus was recognised as a threat by the powers that be. Ironically Herod immediately, even before Jesus utters a word, senses that this Jesus is a threat to his presumption that he is the 'King of the Jews.'

Matthew doesn't allow us to make Christmas into the sentimental celebrations we might prefer. We're jolted back to reality – we live in a world of nations, politicians and the attendant violence. This account contains the unvarnished truth about how low leaders and followers sink when they want to protect themselves.

Unlike today's workers in violence who set off bombs indiscriminately, swoop in by drone or destroy hospitals arbitrarily, Herod was very particular about who he was after. Herod ordered this massacre to protect the peace, his peace; today people do terrible deeds and claim they're doing it in the name of divine righteousness – and not just ISIS, think British, French and Germans, in World War I.

People always work violence, declare war, bomb or invade only for the best of reasons. It's always to preserve law and order, to maintain peace, to ensure the stability of society, the status quo, the way things are; which was why Herod ordered the massacre of the babies in Judea. Jesus' birth upset the balance of power.

We think Herod's actions were barbaric and they were but we've not come far, powerful people fearful that they may lose some of their power create refugees, political unrest, the strong pressing their boots upon the necks of the weak, little children dying and mothers crying.

Matthew tells us the hard and cold truth about Jesus' world, about our world and in doing this he's telling the truth about God. God is with us, God isn't serenely aloof, and God was there in Bethlehem, on the way to Egypt and back again.

Now we're getting near the truth – wherever mothers weep for their children, wherever innocents are gunned down in the streets God is present – today think Aleppo, yesterday think Kosovo, the day before yesterday Rwanda, the day before the day before yesterday think the Holocaust, which Benjamin Netanyahu obviously thinks about on a daily basis... And lest we be smug; last week think of the unjust land wars in this country in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. There were mothers weeping for their children then.

The truth of Christmas is this – wherever mother Rachel weeps for her children; that's where you find Emmanuel, God with us. This, difficult as it is for us to read and comprehend, tells the truth about Christmas – it's a tough truth about injustice, evil men and the violence by which they prop up power.

Isn't the poverty of children in our nation a symptom of the same issue? You can't have chief executives and their lackeys being paid obscene salaries and expect the children to have enough – there isn't that much to go around. Note Gwynne Dyer's comment about the future.

Matthew insists we hear about this; the birth of Jesus was a birth into our world, our violent world, our world full of inequality and abuse, especially of the innocent, the defenceless – in the world then; in the world today our God is involved.

## **BACK HOME**

Despite all this, it's time for the holy family as they've been called to come home, first to Judea only to find one not unlike Herod is in charge, then it's off to Galilee; more specifically to Nazareth, away from Archelaus, away from Jerusalem so the boy can grow and be formed in the security of a peaceful village among his own people. Matthew's lovely expression concludes our text: **'so was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.'**

Not quite a New Year's Day message but true to Matthew and very much rooted in our observation of the world around us. It's appropriate that we conclude then with this memorial - surely this massacre, this violence foreshadows the awful torture and crucifixion of Jesus towards the end of Matthew; remember the notice they put above Jesus' head, 'King of the Jews.' Poor Herod just didn't get it.