

REFUGE IN FOREIGN PARTS

Matthew 2:13-23

Our reading today tells the story of the flight of Jesus and his parents to Egypt to escape King Herod's malicious intentions, Herod's attempt to thwart God's purpose by indiscriminately killing all male children in the Bethlehem region and Jesus's return to Galilee after Herod's death. You can find this reading on page [***] of the church Bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Let me just remind you of the story:

"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." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 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." 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. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "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." After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 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." So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 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, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene." (verses 13-23)

Now, Egypt was the south-western neighbour of Judea and in those times was a Roman province with a large Jewish population, especially in Alexandria, where thousand of Jewish exiles were living. So Egypt was a natural place for Jews to seek asylum when in political danger at home; a substitute for the Jerusalem temple had even been set up in Egypt by Jewish exiles (Josephus, Ant. 13.62–73).

We can see a clear parallel between this NT story of the childhood of Jesus and the OT accounts of the childhood of Moses in Exodus chapter 1. Moses escaped the general infanticide against Israelite children which Pharaoh had ordained and also Pharaoh's specific attempt to kill him following his murder of an Egyptian, after which he fled into exile in Midian just as Jesus fled to Egypt. (Exodus 1:1-15). Indeed because of this parallel and the fact that this account is only recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, many commentators do not accept this story of Jesus's escape to Egypt as having a true historic basis.

However, I do believe this story is historically accurate. Firstly, because the Bible is God's true word to us; and secondly because there is evidence from Jewish sources pointing towards the validity of the account. The Talmud – books of Jewish Law and various historical accounts – maintains that Yeshua (Jesus) was a magician and learned his skills in Egypt. Though it comes from a hostile source, this is clear confirmation for the miracles of Jesus (which the Jews called sorcery) and for his stay in Egypt where the Jewish writers (wrongly) thought he was educated. Origen, an early Christian scholar, finds the same view in Celsus, an anti-Christian writer in the middle of the second century who held that Jesus was brought up as an illegitimate child in Egypt, that he discovered certain miraculous powers, and that on returning to his own country he used them to substantiate his claim to deity.

Many have also sought to doubt the accuracy of the account of Herod's slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem on the grounds that there is no independent historical record of this slaughter and that it seems improbable that Herod would have been so bestial.

This is to fundamentally misunderstand both Herod and those times. Admittedly, there is no independent record of this particular atrocity, but it is mild in comparison with some of Herod's other massacres. He slaughtered the last remnants of the Hasmonean dynasty of Jewish high-priestly kings who had ruled before him. He executed more than half the Sanhedrin. He killed 300 court officers out of hand. He executed his own Hasmonean wife, Mariamne, her mother Alexandra, and his sons Aristobulus, Alexander and Antipater. Finally, as he lay dying, he arranged for all the notable men of Jerusalem to be assembled in the hippodrome and to be killed as soon as his own death was announced. A man of ruthless cruelty and with a fanatical neurosis about any competition, it is quite in character that he should order the execution of all the male children in Bethlehem. It was not a big place; there would probably have been only thirty or so children who were killed, rather than the thousands of Christian tradition, and their deaths would not have made so much as a ripple on the history of the that era.

Although the escape to Egypt was, as I've just argued, a genuine historical event; it was also highly symbolic, and I believe that is the reason why Matthew included this account. It's symbolic because, as I've already noted, it was a recapitulation, a fulfilment, of Israel's history. Israel became a nation after being called into Egypt, and the Exodus from Egypt was the central point in the history of this nation that was becoming the people of God. Pharaoh tried to destroy the Israelites in Egypt, but Moses brought them out of Egypt into the land of promise. Herod, a new Pharaoh, tried to kill the firstborn, Jesus, and in his rage and frustration he slaughtered other innocent firstborn in Bethlehem. However, he failed to kill the Saviour, just as Pharaoh had failed to kill Moses. Eventually, Moses brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, out of the land of bondage and death. Moses' successor, Jesus, was to bring all people, not just the Israelites, out of a worse bondage and a worse death, the death of sin. In our reading today, Matthew is casting Jesus as the successor of Moses: he came to save his people from their sins and fulfilled that mission on the cross. Here, Jesus is seen as the counterpart to Moses, not so much in revelation as in rescue. He is going to usher in the new Exodus. That

is why Jesus's time in Egypt is important in the symbolism of Matthew's Gospel.

When it became safe for Jesus to return to his native land, following the death of Herod, it's not surprising that Joseph did not return to the area ruled by Herod's son – Herod Archelaus – who was probably as brutal as his father – he began his reign by massacring 3,000 people who were celebrating the Passover (Josephus *Ant* 17.213-218). Instead Joseph chose to go and live in Nazareth.

Matthew's quotations of the fulfilment of prophecies from the OT in this passage are interesting. The first, '*Out of Egypt I called my son*', comes from Hosea 11:1 and originally referred to God calling the people of Israel out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Matthew sees in these words a deeper allusion, to the person and work of Jesus. The history of God's children is recapitulated in the history of God's Son. As Israel long ago was led down to Egypt, so was Jesus. As Israel came out of Egypt, so did Jesus. He embodies and fulfils the history of the people of God in his own person.

The second OT reference in verse 18 comes from Jeremiah 31:15. Rachel was Jacob's favourite wife and her death in childbirth set her apart as the sorrowful mother of the Old Testament. She was known among the rabbis as 'the mother of Israel for all time'. Yet her death in childbirth was the gateway to life for Benjamin. Benjamin, the child of her pain, was the ancestor of the Messiah. In Jeremiah's day, Rachel's tomb near Bethlehem saw the lines of captives going past on their way to the Babylonian captivity. In a sense, she entered into the pain and desolation of those departing exiles. And yet here again life came out of death, and the return from exile brought new life to Israel. Bereavement became the pathway to blessing. We can see in God's disappointments the seeds of his ultimate purpose for our good.

Matthew's third OT reference "He will be called a Nazarene" is nowhere to be found in the OT. Possibly Matthew is alluding to the fact that the prophets predicted that the Messiah would be despised and in Jesus's times men from Nazareth were despised. But I think

it's more likely that Matthew was thinking of the name Nazareth as being derived from the Hebrew word '*netzer*' meaning a shoot or a branch. This would fit well with the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1:

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” (Isaiah 11:1 NIV)

because Jesus was a descendent of David and hence of David's father Jesse and so we can see Jesus as a 'shoot' of Jesse.

In our account today Matthew illustrates a number of themes. Firstly, he makes it plain that God works through both surprise and continuity to bring about his purposes. The story of Jesus is utterly continuous with Abraham, with David and with the whole history of the chosen people. But the story of Jesus also bristles with surprises. Perhaps this is to encourage us to expect God to be working in our lives steadily and continuously, making sense of our past history; but also to be on the lookout for God's surprises in our lives, ready to grasp them and follow through their implications when they come.

Secondly, Matthew presented a clear message for the readers of his day. By then the Christian mission to the Gentiles was in full flood, and the tensions with Judaism had reached breaking point. The temptation to give up on the Jews would have been very great. But, in his gospel, Matthew says, 'Don't give up on the Jewish people. God has not given them up. He has a special purpose for them. It stretches back to the dawn of time. It is from Jewish stock that Jesus was born. Don't forget that.'

Thirdly, Matthew also has a word of encouragement about opposition. Opposition to our Christian life and work is inevitable, but God will never allow it to quench His mission. There was every possibility of quenching the Messiah: his mother Mary might have been stoned as an adulteress before he was even born; Jesus might have been killed by Herod as baby; Jesus might have been lost in Egypt. Later he might have been killed by the Pharisees or by hostile crowds before his time had come. But no. God's hand was upon him. Opposition could not extinguish God's light. What an encouragement that would have been to Matthew's readers! The church, so frail, so exposed,

would not be allowed to sink, however threatening the storms and waves that broke over it.

So what have we learned this morning. We've seen that God is working steadily and continuously in our lives and our circumstances and we need to be on the lookout for his surprises, ready to grasp opportunities as they arise. We've seen that God's plans for us cannot be thwarted no matter how great the opposition we face may be. Most importantly, we've seen that Jesus's life is a recapitulation of the Exodus of the Israelite people from Egypt. In the first Exodus the Israelites were redeemed from slavery in Egypt and led out to a glorious freedom in God's Promised Land. In the new Exodus in Jesus, Jesus redeems us from a more terrible and pernicious slavery, the slavery to sin. Jesus redeems us from the death of sin, restores us to fellowship with God and leads us to a new life with the Father in the most glorious promised land of God's eternal kingdom.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”
(John 3:16-18 NIV)

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father this morning I pray that we have learned to look out for your hand leading and guiding us, trusting in you because your plans cannot be thwarted. Finally I pray that we, each and every one of us, will come to know and accept Christ as their personal saviour and redeemer so that our sins will be forgiven, and so that we may be reconciled to the Father and thus enabled to enter into the most glorious promised land of His eternal kingdom.