



## Revd Ro's Reflection on First Sunday of Christmas

### Year A

Matthew 2.13-23

Hebrews 2.10-18

## **& The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus**

Luke 2. 15-21

Galatians 4.4-7

For my reflection this week I am combining the readings for Christmas 1 and The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus. I have chosen to look at Matthew and Galatians from each and combine them. The gospel set for the naming and circumcision of Jesus is from Luke but it deals with the shepherds visit to the Christ child which I looked at last week, the reading set for today ends like this,

<sup>20</sup> 'The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. <sup>21</sup> After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.'

The angel Gabriel had said, 'You will name him Jesus,' and Mary and Joseph obeyed that command. They obey Jewish law which states that all male children are to be circumcised at eight days. Jesus is thus brought up according to Jewish law. That is vital; we remember that so often during his ministry he was accused of trying to overturn it. Jesus reply was that he was the fulfilment of the law and the prophets.

In Matthew's gospel, the reading set for Christmas 1, we are given further details of the story of Jesus' birth. We have no idea of the timing of the visit, we are only told

<sup>2.1</sup> 'In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

It is only in Matthew's gospel that the 'wise men from the east' appear. We will never know who these men were but they follow the star so are sometimes referred to as astronomers. The star foretells an important birth, the birth of a new king. Naturally kings are born in palaces, so they go to Herod for news of the child. Herod, we need to remember, had no vestige of true royal blood, he certainly was not of David's line. He kept his position by power and was backed by the Romans. He is determined to keep his position as with all dictators and does so by use of force. Nothing changes and we see it enacted throughout history and we see it today. So when he hears of a threat to his throne, a child who will be 'king of the Jews' he is determined to stamp it out. It is worth noting that Herod has to ask about the prophecy and seems not to be aware of it himself!

<sup>4</sup> 'calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

So Herod pretends he wants to worship the child and allows the wise men to continue to Bethlehem. We fear for the child because of these words,

<sup>3</sup> 'When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;'

The wise men see the child fall down and worship. This is their epiphany moment, this is the moment they realise they are in the presence of not only greatness but in the presence of what is holy, note incense is one of the gifts. They leave by another route to avoid Herod but they also leave as changed men. They have seen the Messiah, they have worshipped God.

The reading set for Christmas 1 is the flight into Egypt. Once, when I visited friends in the village, I admired a carved figure of Joseph leading the donkey which carried Mary and Jesus. Imagine my amazement when they said we would like you to have it. I was moved to tears. That carved model appears at the top of this Reflection.

Once more Joseph has a revelation in a dream, last time he was told that the child was of the Holy Spirit and that Mary was pure, now the angel warns of impending danger.

<sup>13</sup> 'Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'

Once again Joseph does not question, he accepts the angel's words, as did Mary. Once again obedience changes the course of history. Jesus could have been killed. They have to leave in haste, this time to travel to a foreign country. Right at the beginning of his life Jesus is in grave danger from the powers that be. There is no time to be lost, Herod is ruthless and will resort to anything to protect his position, his power and his line. Sometimes the Christmas story is in danger of being made too cosy. It is anything but. Jesus is homeless; born in a bleak stable; there is utter tumult around this birth for those in Bethlehem and grave, grave danger.

<sup>14</sup> 'Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

The slaughter of the innocents is a disturbing passage and we can't read it without shuddering.

<sup>16</sup> 'When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.'

We may have seen representations of it in stage plays or films but cannot imagine the true horror of it and the heartbreak of the parents whose children were murdered. Tragically similar things have been done throughout history and are still happening. The holy family were refugees, they had to leave home and family. They had to flee taking only what they could carry and seek asylum in a different alien country. I always think of this when I hear of those fleeing from evil regimes or as in Ukraine from war and danger. Jesus has walked that way too. He is born into an occupied country; the king is a brute and a murderer who kills without a second thought, including his own wife! Jesus' life begins in turmoil and deadly danger and that will continue because he is a threat. Jesus is the Lord of all that is and the powers that be will drag him to Calvary because of jealousy, fear and spite. Jesus will taste the worst that humans can do, so we know anything humans experience Jesus has done so before them. This is the God who walks with us and has tasted the worst but has overcome. Jesus escapes into Egypt, he will come out from Egypt, just as at the Exodus and he will lead his people to freedom

<sup>19</sup> 'When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup> 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' <sup>21</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Just look at how many times Matthew quotes from the scriptures, this child is God's Messiah the King born to set his people free. Just look how many times what happened in the account fulfilled the prophecies, says Matthew. There must be no doubt in people's minds as to his identity. Matthew's audience are Jewish, he writes from a Jewish perspective so he continually quotes from the scriptures.

In our reading from Galatians the audience are Gentiles, Paul is the 'apostle to the Gentiles.' So we have the two audiences in our readings, Jews and Gentiles, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians but, says Paul, there is no superiority, they are as one in God's sight.

He is telling the Galatians this wonderful news that in Jesus they are inheritors of God's promises. Once they were pagans; lived according to pagan ways. All that is behind them and a wonderful new way is opened to them through Jesus.

<sup>4.1</sup> 'My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; <sup>2</sup> but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. <sup>3</sup> So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.' They were formally like children who owned nothing but were the property of their father. But that is past, they have turned to the true God and Father, they have accepted Jesus Christ and so have become children of God and co-heirs with Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

<sup>6</sup> And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' <sup>7</sup>So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.' Jesus came into the world, he was born as a Jew, he obeyed the Jewish law but he came for all people. The Gentiles have the offer of God's word and if they turn to Jesus they are adopted as children of God and if they are children then they are heirs and receive everything God has promised. Jesus has won salvation for them, as for the Jews; all are one in Christ.

What a wonderful life affirming message. Think of all those people who have been down trodden or oppressed, think of being that way yourself and being told the great truth, nothing matters, not status, not nationality, not gender, colour, nothing all are equally loved by God, all are free in him. He created us all and we are his children. All we have to do is turn to him and he opens his arms to us in love. Artificial human barriers are dissolved and we are free to be children of God. It is the greatest gift ever given to humans that God came down to earth in love, in Jesus Christ. At Pentecost God sent the Holy Spirit on his followers, that Holy Spirit is with us now, strengthening and comforting.

Now we stand at the cusp of this New Year may we listen to these old words and trust in Him.

*'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'* Minnie Louise Haskins

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