

1st January, 2017.

Reading: Matthew 2: 13 - 23

Sermon: Not quite so idyllic!

When I started thinking about the sermon for today and started looking at this reading, I wondered about it. It doesn't make for pleasant reading and for that reason, it is a part of the Christmas story which is, by and large, ignored because it sort of spoils the Christmas story.

We love the nativity with the angels, the shepherds and the wise men. We love the donkey and the cuddly sheep, even though they did cast a lot of wool this year. It's great to see. We look forward to it and we ooh and we aah at the baby in the manger.

Why would we spoil that image by including murder, the mass slaughter of innocent children, in our nativity? Why would we do that? Why would we shatter the illusion created by our carols and by the nativity play that we put on each year?

We want Christmas to be nice. We want it to be a happy time. We want to focus on the good in it and yet, it wasn't what we make it. There is nothing idyllic in the gospel narrative and yet there was a wonderful truth.

The Saviour of the world was born. God became flesh and He dwelt among us. God breaks in to the reality of the real world as a vulnerable infant. From the beginning, Jesus identified with us and in that harsh reality, Mary bore that child, that child who, one day, would offer hope in a world of darkness.

However, that hope came at a price. **There is weeping. There is great mourning. Rachel is weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted.** Numerous baby boys, aged two years and under, lost their

lives because Herod felt so threatened by the baby who had been born to be king and we ought not to forget that. There was a tremendous cost, but a cost due to the fear of one of the main characters in the story.

As is pointed out on the Church of Scotland's website, there are two main protagonists in the story. There is Herod and there is Joseph. Both are fearful and yet both deal with their fear in totally different ways.

Joseph fears for the lives of his young child and his wife and so uppermost in his mind is the protection of Mary and Jesus. To keep them as safe as he can, Joseph flees with his family, under the cover of darkness.

Joseph is out to protect his dependents as best he can and in so doing demonstrates the love and compassion that he feels for those in his care. Joseph's focus is on others.

Herod also acts out of fear, but fear for his position. This tiny child is a threat to him, or so he believes, and so his mistaken belief and his fear lead to the total destruction of so many young lives and demonstrate a complete lack of compassion on his part for his victims and for their families. Herod's focus is on himself.

Penny Hewlett wrote a poem called Herod.

O I promised them! I spoke them sweet.

I spilled soft words upon their ears,
saying nothing of my private fears.

I said, "You must journey on and greet
this new born king, and then must journey back again
and bring me news that, I may also go and worship him."

Who gave the game away? How did they know?
How could they guess? From what source did they learn?
What ever happened, they did not return;
there was no information, nothing to show.
And no address. A pity - the damage could have been less.
As it was, I'm afraid, we made a bloody mess.

I sent my soldiers out with orders to, well, kill
all male children up to two years old.
I know such action makes me seem quite cold.
But I'm a king, I've a duty to fulfil;
you have to see, it's a matter of national security.
And I can't allow a child to grow to rival me.

It's only little people with their little lives
that can afford to take a moral stand.
I have to think what's best for all this land.
So, yes, there were some unimportant Hebrew wives
that wept and wailed for their little Hebrew males.
But what matters is my place is unassailed.

As we look closely at the Christmas story, we realise that there are two sides to it which beautifully portray life, the harsh reality of life, as we know it, even today. And yep, in the midst of everyday life, of birth and death, there is still hope. There is still goodness and kindness to be seen.

When we look at Syria, we see similar protagonists very clearly.

There are those who are intent on protecting their families and who seek escape from areas which have been bombed relentlessly. Many have behaved like Joseph and have escaped under the cover of darkness, so scared were they of being captured.

In the nativity story, the wise men helped Joseph by not returning to Herod. Like Joseph, they demonstrated kindness and goodness. In Syria, there are the white helmets who seek to bring people to safety, who offer hope in a world of darkness and destruction.

By the same token, there are those who are focused only on destruction, so intent are they on maintaining the power they have. Fear combined with a hunger for power drives them on as it did Herod.

It is into the harsh reality of this world, into the darkness of this world, that God stepped to show us that there is another way. Destruction and fear can be tackled with love and compassion.

The events of the gospel narrative are fairly drastic as indeed are the events in Syria and in so many other parts of the world. There are many threats in our world today, many threats which cause fear among ordinary people like us.

What is our response to those threats? Sometimes we have to protect the vulnerable but out of love and kindness. Sometimes we have to meet the threat head on clinging to the fact that there is hope and there is light in the darkest of circumstances because it was into the darkness that God came to offer hope, and it all began with a vulnerable child.

As we take our first faltering steps into the new year with all its unknowns, there is a light shining to guide us and to lead us onwards. There is hope even in the darkest of circumstances when we trust in our God and follow His light.

What will 2017 bring our way? Who knows but we do know the One who enters the year with us and we know that He will be faithful in the coming year as He was in the past. Journey onwards in faith and in the light of our God.