

## Reflection for Christmas 2 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Childhood!

As we pass into adulthood and get “all grown up”, then pass into a more mature age, how do we look back on our childhood? Are those times full of happy memories, a period of development and excitement, or something that simply had to be endured before adult life could really begin; or maybe a mixture of the two?

Only two of the four Gospels - Matthew and Luke - give us a glimpse into Jesus' childhood years, but what they tell us is revealing. In Matthew, for example, we get two glimpses of Jesus: firstly as a refugee and secondly as a boy growing up in town of Nazareth in Galilee. As we approach the Epiphany, the coming of the magi, recorded only in Matthew's gospel, let us ponder a little on Jesus' childhood as he records it.

The story of Mary, Joseph, and young Jesus escaping into Egypt, as political refugees, comes at the end of the account of the magi's visit; a visit those of us who gather on Thursday morning for communion at Christ Church, Huntly will reflect upon, as we celebrate the Epiphany. However, it is worth reminding ourselves what was going on and why Jesus and his family are forced to escape. It's a story that is quite often passed over, maybe deliberately ignored during the celebration of Christmas and Epiphany – we think of the wise men and their gifts but prefer to ignore the massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem and its ramifications – somehow it does not “fit” the season. Yet stop and look around the world and reflect upon the story. It challenges us with suffering, senseless violence and oppression that we still see today; it makes us want to weep and get angry.

It's an incident that Matthew sees as fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah which.

*“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,  
because her children are no more.”*

It's a narrative that illustrates what can happen when power and insecurity go hand in hand with being paranoid. Herod the Great was just such a figure. His reign spans the period 37-4 BCE and he was a man of huge ambition: a man who attempted to rule in a civilized, rational, and constructive way, a great builder, with many of the remains in the Holy Land today dating from his period: the temple mount, Herodian, Masada and the aqueduct at Caesarea being just a few examples. Yet he was a man who was plagued with a violent disposition, paranoid about his position and not adverse to ordering executions almost at will.

Look at a map of Jerusalem at the time and you see how the fortification to protect his palace were as strong, if not stronger, inside the city, as out. You begin to understand the sort of man he was.

Along comes Jesus and, although only a young child, he is perceived as a challenge or threat: Such a threat that Herod, having realised how the wise men have tricked him, orders the massacre of all boys under the age of two in Bethlehem. The innocent caught up, as so often down through history, as politics plays out; caught up in a much bigger game they do not understand or even want to be part of.

Joseph, though, gets to hear of Herod's intentions through a dream and takes his young family to Egypt and safety. If Christ's birth was not low enough in a humble stable, now he finds himself a political refugee forced from the country Joseph would have called home into a foreign land, simply in order to survive.

This story in Jesus' early life makes several points.

First, it underlines the way God is with us even in the most difficult of circumstances. He knows, because he has been there. This is the very Son of God, forced to flee; the Son of God who, through his own experience, understands the reality of life as a refugee, being homeless and destitute.

Secondly, it is a story that should touch us, as it raises an issue we should not ignore; the plight of the homeless, and those who are caught up in events beyond their control and their understanding; of those who become refugees, either in their own countries or outside as result of so many situations and circumstances, some political, some as the result of natural disasters.

Thirdly, and back in the context of the original story we have a reminder of the way even from his earliest days there was opposition to Jesus; to both who he was and to the message he brought. To use Johannian type terminology, the light that challenges the darkness is not wanted by the world. The world's reaction is to attempt to put it out. It is just this division between light and darkness that leads finally to Christ's death.

It is little wonder that the same is often true today; where the light of Christ shines it is often not wanted.

Moving on though, Matthew ends his account of Jesus early years with normality beginning to return to Jesus' young life. With Herod's death Joseph takes the family home to Nazareth in Galilee, and that is where the boy Jesus grows up.

But again, that is not the best of starts in life. In Jesus' day Nazareth was not the busy Arab town of today; rather an obscure town, a place of little consequence and from where little of any good ever came. In John's gospel Nathaniel asks this "*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*" expressing the prejudiced view many had of the place. Yet it is here that Jesus grows from childhood into an adult.

We can, I am sure, think of places that carry the same sort of burden today.

Again we are reminded that God's plan for salvation often does not work through palaces or privileges but rather begins at grass roots and works from there.

Emmanuel - God very truly with us.

Some words from our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah which remind us of God at work restoring healing, lifting up from the darkest places.

*With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.*

*Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.'*