

Christmas 1 Year A

Readings: Isaiah 63: 7 – 9

Psalm 148

Hebrews 2: 10 – 18

Matthew 2: 13 – 23

On Christmas Eve we sang contently “Silent Night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...sleep in heavenly peace.” Then on Christmas Day we sang, “Hark the herald angel sing, glory to the new born king, peace on earth and mercy mild God and sinners reconciled.” We are still in the Christmas

season, so what will we sing today about the Christmas story? What will we now sing about the Prince of peace after his arrival?

Often the birth of a baby seems like the highlight for parents after months of waiting and preparing. We get excited for all kinds of reasons and among them is the experience of something or someone new in our life. The joy of a newborn baby is one of those precious experiences that make all the waiting, all the preparations, and all the pain worthwhile.

But like most human experiences, things change over time. The birth is only part of the journey of life. The baby cannot remain merely as a newborn, but has to grow up. Parents have to change the way they respond to this development just as they did during the nine months leading up to giving birth. As circumstances change, so too can our thinking and feelings about our family relations. Post-natal depression happens for mothers, and sleepless nights and increasing financial costs to care for a child can take its toll on parents. So, the joy of giving birth to a baby is part of the reality of life that also includes pain and grief. I don't need to explain further because I believe we all know that.

I believe it was no different for Joseph and Mary and their newborn son, Jesus. Once the excitement of the arrival of the baby was over, the hard realities of life resurfaced. According to Matthew, instead of adoring well-wishers continuing to crowd around the holy family, there is a sense of isolation again for them. The shepherds have all gone back to looking after their sheep in the fields. The men from the East, having given their expensive gifts, seem in hurry to leave. They don't even return the way they came. For fear of King Herod, they take a different route home.

Even divine messages have changed. Instead of choirs of angels declaring peace on earth to all, there are now words of warning. Instead of preparations to settle down to establish security of family life, Joseph, Mary and the baby have to flee for their lives due to King Herod's order of the massacre of infants in Bethlehem. They are to leave their extended family and friends, leave their home, leave their land, and live as refugees in Egypt.

Having this account as part of the Christmas story is somewhat uncomfortable. Advent has been helping us focus on the coming of Jesus in anticipating the hope, peace, joy and love

that God incarnate brings to the world. So where has all that hope, all that peace, all that joy and all that love gone? We don't seem to hear any of that in this scene of the Christmas story. It's not one we like to associate with Christmas. Images of a family fleeing in fear and of the slaughter of children do not make it onto Christmas cards or into carols for people to share. It's a difficult story to tell our little children and their parents.

There are other difficulties as well. Although the historical Herod the Great was known to be ruthless in maintaining his grasp on power, there is no historical record, among Herod's

numerous atrocities, of his slaughter of children in Israel. There is also no evidence to this act reflected in or outside of the New Testament.

But there is also the ethical difficulty of this story. If Herod had ordered the slaughter of innocent infants in Bethlehem, why did God's messenger only tell Joseph and his family to flee and not other parents? Why is one family spared their child and not other families? The birth of Jesus may have been good news announced to people like the shepherds, but if the rest of the story is true, then for the other

expecting parents at the time, Jesus' birth ultimately meant death for their children.

So why does Matthew tell this story? Well, Matthew has a particular view of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel has a very Jewish flavour about it in that he uses many references from Jewish scripture because he was writing primarily for Jewish Christians. It seems that Matthew wants to make connections of his understanding of Jesus and Israel's traditions. For Matthew, Joseph and his family's flight to and return from Egypt was "to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son'" (Mt. 2:15). This

quote from Hosea 11:1 recalled the exodus story of Israel with Moses. And in many respects, Matthew depicts the baby Jesus as the new Moses who not only escapes the murderous efforts of Herod as Pharaoh, but also one who eventually returns to save his people. Matthew clearly sees Jesus as the messiah promised from the ancient traditions of Israel who will save his people.

But Matthew also sees Jesus as Emmanuel – God with us. The savior of God’s people will be God himself who, in the flesh, dwells with people. We hear of God’s saving work in our reading from Isaiah 63: “And he became their

savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them” (v.8-9). For Matthew, the saving presence of God is found in Jesus. And just as God saved his people in all their distress, the birth of Jesus becomes a saving work grounded in the hard realities of human life. These are realities that include painful experiences.

By being born as one of us, Jesus shares our humanity. I think this was what the writer to the Hebrews was conveying in our epistle reading. Although not referring to the birth of Jesus, the writer clearly understands how

Jesus identifies himself with our humanity. “For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason, Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters” (Heb. 2:11). And further on, “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things...Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be a faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:14, 17).

These readings indicate the purpose of God in Christ. Jesus was born to serve God’s ultimate

purpose – to reconcile the world to God. This task involves sharing our humanity with all our joys and grief. It means sharing our reality of both good and painful experiences. It means that the baby born away in a manger where he laid his sweet head cannot remain there indefinitely. Times change, circumstances change, and people change. People grow up and move on.

Maybe that is the point for our Gospel reading today. The little Lord Jesus we fondly sing of has to grow up. His birth is but only part of the journey to fulfil his purpose. And like us, he will develop through the various

experiences of what life brings. And like us, he will eventually die. In a way, our birth is but the beginning of the dying process. Though hard to comprehend, God in Christ will eventually die to save his people.

Despite the difficulties we may have with this as part of the Christmas story, we cannot deny that painful experiences or incomprehensible ones are part of our reality. We live with the reality of good and bad experiences and with the joy and sorrow they bring, as well as with the mysteries of life – those things we don't always understand, but that still shapes our life.

And as people of God or a community of faith, we can still sing about such things. Today, we continue to sing the Christmas story, of the mystery of God coming to us as a baby, to not only share our humanity and reality, but to ultimately impact it with his hope, peace, joy and love. Our final hymn reaffirms the heart of the Christmas story:

From heaven you came helpless babe

Entered our world, your glory veiled

Not be served but to serve

And give your life that we might live

This is our God, the servant king

Who calls now to follow him

To give our lives as a daily offering

Of worship to the servant king. Amen.