A Paschal Nativity Story

A sermon on Matthew 2: 13-23 & Hebrews 2: 10-18 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 January 2023

Message

In the Christ-child we encounter God responding to our suffering and leading us into the promised land of new life.

Sermon

Bishop Tom Wright tells the following story (*New Testament for Everyone*, Matthew, p.14):

> *I was once preaching at a big Christmas service where a well-known historian, famous for his scepticism towards Christianity, had been persuaded to attend by his family. Afterwards, he approached me, all smiles.*
>
> *'I've finally worked out', he declared, 'why people like Christmas.'*
>
> *'Really?' I said. 'Do tell me.'*
>
> *'A baby threatens no one,' he said, 'so the whole thing is a happy event which means nothing at all!'*
>
> *I was dumbfounded. At the heart of the Christmas story in Matthew's gospel is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man around that he kills a whole village full of other babies in order to try to get rid of him.*

The thing that struck me as I read that story, is that they are both right. Bishop Tom is certainly right about the dark and dangerous stories in the gospel, but unfortunately, I think the sceptical historian was right too. The Christmas that most people like so much is not the one that includes those dark and dangerous stories; it is the one that has been cleaned up by Hallmark Cards and Myer windows and TV producers until it is indeed "a happy event which means nothing at all."

I doubt whether the gospel writers foresaw the risk of the nativity stories being sentimentalised into little more than feel-good baby stories which mean nothing at all, but if they did, it was Matthew who seems to have tried hardest to circumvent that possibility. Or perhaps you could say that Mark and John tried harder by leaving the birth stories out altogether, but of the two that include them, Matthew gives us the least to get all gushy about.

I suspect that Luke would want to protest that he was the one who had Jesus born in a dirty cow shed to a pair of lost unmarried travellers far from home and visited only by grotty hallucinating shepherds, but if he could see how Hallmark can make that look on the Christmas cards, he'd concede defeat. Of course Hallmark make plenty of money out of Matthew's magi, the visiting eastern mystics, too, but they usually have to put them in Luke's stable to make them look sufficiently cute.

Matthew of course could not foresee that our generation might be oblivious to the shock, and even offence, caused by his suggestion that it was these foreign mystics from some other religion, and not the Jewish priests and biblical scholars, who first recognised the baby as God's anointed one. But with his follow up story of what happened when the visitors accidentally tipped off mad King Herod about this birth, he succeeded in crafting a story too chilling and gruesome for Hallmark. Perhaps it is testimony to the near total success of the sentimentalisers and trivialisers that this story is the least well known of all the stories

surrounding the birth of Jesus. And even where it is known, it is certainly the least understood.

And yet, is it not this story, of all the nativity stories, that most clearly connects the birth of Jesus with some of the burning issues of our own day? A generation of children stolen from their families on the say so of the government of the day. Refugees fleeing violent repression and seeking asylum in other countries. Governments employing massive violence to achieve political ends; killing large numbers of people in an attempt to hunt down just one person; and explaining away civilian deaths as justifiable collateral damage. It all sounds eerily current doesn't it? Some historians reckon that Jesus and his family would have had to make at least part of their flight to Egypt by sea, so we could even have a picture of refugee boat people.

Not only is this the story that makes the strongest connections between the nativity and the harsh realities of the world, it is also the story that most clearly relates the birth of Jesus to the bigger themes of his mission in the world. It is, you could say, the story that connects the Christmas faith directly to the Easter faith.

There is little question that Matthew was quite deliberate in drawing these connections, but it is also true that he did so in ways that are not nearly as obvious to us as they were to the first recipients of his gospel account, a congregation deeply steeped in the traditions and stories of ancient Israel. For rather than draw the lines directly from Christmas to Easter, Matthew links the birth stories to some of the most important ancient Jewish stories, stories which the early Christians were more used to drawing on to illustrate the saving significance of the Easter events. Let me put on my teacher's hat for a minute and show you how Matthew does this.

The central character in most of Matthew's version of the birth stories is Joseph, unlike Luke's account which is much more interested in Mary. In Matthew's account the angel announces the birth to Joseph in a dream. In tonight's story, Joseph has three more dreams in which he receives messages from God: telling him to take his wife and baby to Egypt; telling him to bring them back again; and telling them not to settle back in Judea but to move north to Galilee where they settled in Nazareth.

Already for the hearer who is fluent in Hebrew folklore, or perhaps even for hearers who have recently attended a production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Technicolour Dreamcoat*, some memories are being evoked. This is not the first dreamer named Joseph who has taken his family to Egypt to avoid death. More than a thousand years earlier a man named Joseph, renowned for his ability to interpret dreams, had taken his ageing father, Jacob, and his eleven brothers and their families to Egypt to avoid death in a terrible famine.

Egypt has always had a crucial place in Jewish self-understanding. To the Jewish mind, Egypt evoked images of slavery, of oppression, of suffering. And the story of coming out of Egypt was, to the Jewish mind, the central story of the birth of the nation, the great liberation, the defining event of God's decisive action for his chosen people, bringing them out of captivity and leading them to a new hope, a new future, a promised land.

And this central story had a central hero, Moses. A central hero who the legends suggested was specially protected from birth. For when Moses was only a baby, a wicked king decreed that all the male Hebrew babies under the age of two were to be killed, and it was only the

covert actions of this baby's parents that enabled him to survive the slaughter and live to lead the people out of Egypt into the promised land.

So the story of the flight to Egypt and the return from there was about a whole lot more than just a very obscure prophesy about calling a son out of Egypt. And the story of the slaughter of the infants was about a whole lot more than just Jeremiah's picture of grieving mothers.

These stories tap straight in to the most treasured and identity-defining stories in Hebrew folklore. Every Jewish family recited and partially enacted the stories of the escape from Egypt every year at Passover. It was more familiar to them than the Christmas stories are to us. Every Hebrew kid grew up on stories of Moses floating in the bulrushes to avoid the slaughter of the infants, and of the grown-up Moses coming out of hiding after the death of the king who had sought to kill him. Matthew's readers and listeners were not going to miss his blatant cross referencing to stories of the central figure in the great liberation of God's people.

Jesus, Matthew is saying, is God's chosen agent of liberation, just as Moses was. And there is no doubt that the people were looking for another liberator. For more than four hundred years Israel had been under the thumb of foreign powers; first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks and now the Romans. Any story about a baby, born of the line of David in the city of David, who somehow escapes the slaughter of every male Hebrew child under the age of two, who is hidden till the death of a vengeful king, and who symbolically comes out of Egypt into the promised land, is a story which is going to quickly capture the imagination of Jewish listeners longing for the promised Messiah of God who would come like a new Moses and lead the chosen people to freedom once again.

And so in its context, Matthew's message was a real message of hope, loaded with signs of promise. It was a message of real good news for a real oppressed people. God is acting in human history again, just as in the time of Moses. God has heard the cries of the suffering and has seen the injustice that his people are being subjected to and has anointed a liberator to cast off the yoke of oppression and lead them to freedom.

And as Matthew will tell us later, unlike Moses, this liberator will be with us for ever. Matthew's story starts with the promise of Emmanuel, God is with us, and closes 28 chapters later with the promise repeated, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

This act of liberation is not a one-off event that can be completed in one place in one lifetime. This act of liberation may have begun with the baby in Bethlehem, but it is to be continued by all those who would bear the name of Christ in every place where there is suffering, distress, injustice, poverty, despair and oppression.

Now, while we see Matthew drawing connections here between these ancient liberation stories and the Christmas stories, we are much more familiar with drawing their connections to the events of Jesus death and resurrection. We make connections between the Passover and the last supper. We make connections between the waters of baptism and the crossing of the Red Sea. We speak of Jesus passing through the deep waters of death to lead us from slavery into the promised land of God's resurrection life. You can hear those connections being drawn in the reading we heard from the letter to the Hebrews, where the writer speaks of Jesus sharing

our flesh and blood so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.

So it is by connecting the birth stories to these stories that Matthew illuminates the significance of the birth of Jesus for a faith centred on the stories of his death and resurrection. And in the process he illuminates for us how we can stand around the Lord's Table and not only meaningfully call to memory the stories of both ends of Christ's life, but also call to mind and prayer all those who have lost home or family or children or freedom to the violence the the world's power mongers.

And as we weave all these stories together at the table, we encounter again the Christ who hears the cries of all who suffer, comes to lead us out of fear and slavery and into the wide open spaces of God's love, and promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age.