

Sermon for 28th December 2025, Year A, Christmas I

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Matthew 2:13-23

Sermon

This Gospel reading for the first Sunday after Christmas is rather strangely out of order. The story picks up just after the Wise Men have gone home, but we don't even hear their story until the Epiphany next week. But let's not worry ourselves about the vagaries of the Episcopalian lectionary – there are far more interesting things to ponder in this very complicated story about the Holy Family being forced into exile in Egypt to hide from the jealousy of King Herod.

King Herod the Great ruled from 37 to 4 BC. He was an Idumean, who were a people from Edom to the south of ancient Israel. They weren't Jews, but they settled in Judea and in some cases were forcibly converted to Judaism. Herod was appointed as a client king by the Romans but he never felt secure, so he maintained his own private army and built fortresses in Jerusalem and several other places so that he would never be far from a refuge. He had descendants from the rival Hasmonean dynasty killed, and even responded to intrigues and plots within his own family by killing his wife and one of his own sons. So, while there's no evidence outwith this bible story that he ever slaughtered children in Bethlehem, it's certainly consistent with his paranoia and his insecurities as a leader.

You may also have noticed a curious inconsistency with the dates I just mentioned. Herod died in 4 BC – which means Jesus must have been born in about 6 BC. Yes, Jesus was born six years Before Christ. If you want the scholarly explanation, it's all because when in 533AD Dionysius Exiguus calculated the

date of Christ's birth, he worked it out relative to the founding of Rome, but he was a few years out, and we've carried on with that dating error ever since!

But to return to the story of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt – this is something that only appears in Matthew's Gospel, and it is wrapped up thoroughly in the context of dreams and Old Testament prophecies, all of which are designed to prove to a Jewish audience that Jesus is fulfilling all the traditional expectations of the Messiah.

Typically, at Christmas, we combine the stories of Jesus's birth as they appear in Matthew and Luke's Gospels and present a synthesis of shepherds and wise men and urgent travels between Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Egypt, but when the two Gospels are read independently, they present quite different stories.

In Luke's Gospel, Joseph and Mary are living in Nazareth but Joseph must return to Bethlehem for a census. But in Matthew's Gospel, the Holy Family are based in Bethlehem all along. That's where they live until they are forced out as refugees into Egypt, and when they later return, they originally plan to return to Bethlehem in Judea until they realise that Herod's son Archelaus is now ruling in Judea – and he is even more brutal than his father – so Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee again north to Galilee where they eventually settle in obscure, little-known Nazareth.

Ultimately the key elements of the story are the same – Jesus is born in Bethlehem and grows up in Nazareth, but the backstory of how we get there is essentially reversed in the two Gospel accounts, which were written for two very different audiences.

Now, all of this historical stuff might feel a bit excessive for understanding these Christmas stories we know so well, but as a scholar once said, if you take a 'text' out of its 'context', then you are left only with a 'con', so let's do our best to

understand why Matthew felt that including this story of Joseph's dreams and exile in Egypt was so important, while Luke ignored it completely.

Firstly, Matthew's Gospel is written for a thoroughly Jewish audience, so he is constantly concerned to show how Jesus and the Holy Family are fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. He wants to demonstrate strong parallels with the story of the Hebrew people going into exile in Egypt and then returning, led by Moses the lawgiver and now by Jesus the law-fulfiller. Like his Old Testament namesake – Joseph of the Technicolour Dreamcoat – Mary's husband Joseph is also a dreamer; he receives several dreams from God containing warnings and instructions, which he follows immediately after the wise men have left, escaping with his family at night to become a refugee.

The parallels Matthew is making are clear enough, but there are some immediate problematic issues here for those of us who will want to know why God warned Joseph about Herod's murderous intentions, but apparently didn't warn the rest of the families of Bethlehem, resulting in this terrible murder of the Holy Innocents – all the boys under the age of two. Bethlehem would have been a small village, so the number of deaths may have been very few, but even so, why rescue the Holy Family but allow the others to suffer unimaginable grief and pain?

There have been many attempts to offer explanations for this of course, none of which are very satisfactory. There is never a good answer to the question of why God might help one family with a miracle but not another.

One non-miraculous suggestion is that what Matthew refers to as a dream is really just the result of Joseph thinking through what the Wise Men have told him about Herod's intentions and deciding they need to immediately get out of the country. The language of dreams might simply be poetic licence for Joseph's sudden realisation that his family were in deadly danger.

Even so, it's clear that Matthew's Gospel has other concerns than trying to answer why God allows some suffering but prevents others. Matthew's goal is to help his Jewish community understand that God was acting from the very beginning of Jesus's life to fulfil various prophecies associated with the Messiah, even though the political forces of the world were already doing their best to oppose them. Throughout history, God almost never uses direct force to overthrow evil kings, despite how much we might want him to zap some people with lightning bolts; instead, he became a human himself, to transform the world through vulnerable love, not righteous violence.

So, I think what Matthew is trying to do in his Gospel is show how much Jesus's early life reflects the story of the Jewish people as a whole. The Jews had already suffered two terrible exiles – first in Egypt and then later in Babylon, and even when they were able to return, the place they returned to was no longer the same place they had left. Similarly, when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are finally able to return from exile in Egypt, they cannot even go back to their home in Bethlehem but must make a new home in Nazareth – an often-mocked backwater village. They never quite stop being refugees.

Often at Christmas, churches put out Nativity displays, which get busier and busier as the wise men arrive with their camels and gifts, but perhaps it would be more meaningful to also show the aftermath once all the guests have departed, and Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are left alone in the larger world, facing violence, repression and terror.

I wonder what dreams you wish Joseph could have had for his family's future. Perhaps a dream of a world where his refugee family would find itself at last welcome and secure and able to flourish? Today we are invited to ponder what such a world might look like, in which baby Jesus would never again need to be refugee Jesus.