

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS 29:12:2013 Matthew 2:13-23

Instead of having time to enjoy their baby, Mary and Joseph suddenly found themselves refugees. A dream angel warned Joseph “Go now! Take Mary and the babe over the border into Egypt and safety.” The family had come to Bethlehem for the tax census. They had planned to be away from home but a brief time. Now, they must leave behind their home, Joseph’s carpentry shop and tools, leave everything they owned to relocate to a foreign land. (A child was asked to draw the Flight into Egypt. She drew an aeroplane with Holy Family faces at the windows. “Who’s that?” asked teacher. “That’s Pontius the pilot.” “But, what’s this insect in the back window?” The child frowned at the silly teacher. “God said ‘Joseph, take Mary and the Babe and flea into Egypt.’”)

Mary and Joseph may not have known their Bible history. 1700 years before, another Joseph, he of the coat of many colours, had to leave behind everything when sold as a slave into Egypt by his jealous brothers, because he, too, dreamed dreams. This was all God’s plan. This Joseph rose to prominence, and, when a terrible famine threatened to kill God’s people back in the Holy Land, Joseph invited them (especially his horrid brothers with their families) to come to live in famine-free Egypt. However, 430 years on, newer fear-filled Egyptian rulers turned nasty, who had no knowledge of how these numerous Jewish refugees came to be in the land, and Moses and led the Chosen people back to Israel. 1250 years on, things have reversed again. Egypt, which had once tried to enslave the Chosen, now welcomed the second Joseph, Mary and baby. The family found a large expatriate Jewish community in Egypt, (also refugees from Herod), and, perhaps, the family had the recent gold gift to cushion and provision their stay. God never calls us to a task and then says, “You’re on your own.” No way. God is always a God of providence and preservation.

Why did the family flee? King Herod was a vicious, paranoid dictator. Fanatically insecure and ruthless, he had waded through the blood slaughter of his own family when he perceived a potential threat to his hold on power. Now, outraged that, warned by God, the wise men had circumnavigated his insane conspiracy to find to kill this Babe of competition, Herod flew into a tyrannical rage and ordered the mass murder of children. Life was cheap. Dead babies would not disturb his sleep. Herod burned with terrified fury because Hebrew Scripture warned him: the promised Messiah was a game-changer, who would overturn the world. Herod symbolizes the horrible destruction that fearful folk do if they use their powers in furtive, pathetic, but futile attempts at self-preservation.

Herod’s cruel infliction of heartrending misery was Bible history repeating. As I said, in Moses’ time, from earlier being welcomed to Egypt, later leaders became tyrannous. These leaders ordered the mass execution of newborn Jewry in Egypt to consolidate their hold on power. Moses was raised up to bring the people home. But, hundreds of years on, when returned to the Holy land, Israel was crushed in warfare, and its people deported from Ramah, near Bethlehem, to Syria. In today’s Gospel are the words, “A voice was heard in

Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children.” Rachel, mother of the first Joseph, was buried in Ramah. This was the embarkation point for this earlier Auschwitz exile. In a sense, from her grave, Rachel was weeping for her children slain in Egypt earlier, slain in Syria when deported, and now, slain in Bethlehem by Herod. “She refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

In the hymn for Christmas, Mary laid her babe so peacefully in a cattle trough, that “no crying he makes.” This Sunday, there are heard the frantic screams of heart-broken families as a hellish horde of death dealers pull children from their cribs to splash their blood. We can only hope that the bereaved parents of these dead newborns had also been warned to flee, but, unlike the immediately obedient Joseph, they had not realized the imminent danger. In blood-red robes, these children were the first martyrs, who died to save their newborn King. This Christmas, there are parents still whose arms hold lifeless child forms, parents who cry for children lost in horrific present acts of warfare, hunger and preventable disease. We are so blessed. Can we be filled with a compassionate desire to do something or will we flip the television channel-change to keep our Christmas comfort?

In Egypt, the second Joseph dreamed of home. But, where to go? Given the bestial cruelty of dead Herod’s successor, the Babe must be kept out of political agitation, kept away from a prosperous lifestyle so he would experience poverty, but also join with non-Jews to broaden his mind-set. Joseph decided on Dullsville Nazareth, a safe place for Jesus to focus on development as Messiah.

The Hebrew prophet Hosea had once written the Gospel words “out of Egypt, I called my son.” As Moses once led the Chosen from physical slavery in Egypt, so Jesus, a new Moses, will lead the new Chosen, you and me, from the slavery of sin. Given human free-will, at times, it is so hard to see the God who preserved the Holy Family, quietly at work in our world. It is hard to see God standing in the shadows keeping watch over God’s own, turning evil around to bring about good. At times, like Rachel, God must weep. But God’s promise is, the day will dawn when hurt will be healed and fear will be wiped away. This is where we come in as a parish family. We are all that Jesus has in this place to hurry along that day by solid Christ-like example. We are the Church and we will make it come to be, as the hymn sings “soul by soul and silently, her shining bounds increase; her ways are ways of gentleness and all her pathways peace.”

To God be the glory.

Walter McEntee