

Theme: - The massacre at Bethlehem

Before we launch into our reading from Matthew's gospel we need to set the scene. At the time of King Herod, after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men came from the east, which would have been Arabia, which interestingly means that they were probably Gentiles. So right at the beginning God introduced Jesus first to the Jews, when the shepherds paid him homage, and now to the Gentiles from Arabia.

When Herod heard that wise men were coming to see a baby who was to be king of the Jews he became very frightened and all Jerusalem with him. He summoned his chief priests to determine where the Messiah was to be born, and they told him Bethlehem in Judea. Herod then summoned the wise men to find out the exact time the star first appeared, saying that he too wanted to pay homage to the child, so he asked the wise men to return via Jerusalem and tell him where the child was.

We now pick up the story from verse 13 which reads, 'after they had left,' and that refers to the wise men leaving Herod and Jerusalem, then God, through a dream told the wise men not to return to Herod, so after their visit to Jesus they left for their own country by another road. Now it was after the wise men had left Joseph and Mary that God then spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to take his family to Egypt for safety, and to stay there until God tells him to return home, because Herod was about to search for the child to destroy him.

Now in the ancient world they were in no doubt that God spoke to people in dreams; In the book of Daniel, Daniel interprets the dreams of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and it's clear from the record that he prospered in the process. I suspect that most of us believe that God speaks to us in dreams, and for the record I too believe that God speaks to us in dreams, and indeed in all sorts of situations; in our prayers and when reading the Bible are of course obvious ones; but it can be when we're reading any book or at any time, and in any circumstance. The secret is to always stay in close contact with God, so that when he does want to speak to us, we not only hear him, but also more importantly, can recognize his voice, and understand what he is saying. Knowing that it is God who is speaking to us can and should encourage us to take notice of what he is saying and to act accordingly.

When Joseph was warned in a dream to flee into Egypt to escape Herod's murderous intentions, he had no doubt of its authenticity; the holy family's flight into Egypt, starting at night, was entirely consistent following God's warning. And we must not gloss over that because it was a long way to Egypt and there was no public transport and we are speaking of a journey of about 200 miles, and to a place that he didn't know, but on the plus side there would have been other Jews who lived in Egypt that he could go to.

Being forced out of your home and your country poses hardship for all refugees both then and now, and we need to take care of them as the Egyptians cared for Joseph and his family until the situation in their own country improves and they are able to return home.

Now Joseph and his family departed "by night." They were away from home when God spoke to Joseph so they could not return home to settle affairs or to pick up Joseph's tools. They will have to pay for food and lodging on their journey. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the Magi gave to the baby Jesus are part of God's provision for the journey. These gifts are valuable and portable. Joseph can take them on the journey and sell them or exchange them as needed until he gets established. as a carpenter in Egypt.

Joseph shows unwavering obedience, even though his life is about to be turned upside down by being asked to go to a foreign country, that he may know nothing about, or indeed even know how to get there, or knowing what hazards they are likely to encounter; even with all these questions going round and round in his head, Joseph still obeys without question. We may think that we know very little about Joseph, but actually we know a significant thing about him. We know that he is a devote Jew who can hear God's voice, that he can understand what God is telling him, and that he obeys promptly and without question, which was so crucial to Jesus's safety. In the same way, so also is our obedience crucial to God's plans for each of us. We cannot see the fullness of God's plan for our lives any better than Joseph could see it for

his life, but we can be assured that our faithfulness and obedience will lead to great things for us in the future as they did for Joseph and his family.

Going back to the end of verse 15 Matthew writes, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,” and Matthew is referring to Hosea chapter 11 verse 1, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Now Matthew knew that the quotation from Hosea was not a prophesy but was a comment about God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt centuries before. Matthew is connecting Jesus’ journey into Egypt as an infant with that part of Israel’s history, and with Moses’ role in freeing his people. Matthew is asserting that while Moses freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Jesus will free people from slavery to sin; this was Matthew’s complete message.

But Matthew only uses the second half of the verse, “out of Egypt I called my Son.” So, for those people who were not steeped in Jewish history the partial quotation serves as a prophesy of the Messiah being called out of Egypt by God. Matthew was also using that shortened version from Hosea to stress that it was God, not Joseph or Mary, who instigated the return of Jesus to Israel, because it was God who wanted Jesus to grow up in Israel so that he would know his countrymen intimately.

Going back to the time that Herod realized that he had been tricked by the wise men, and that the wise men were not going to return, and give the information about where Jesus was living, Herod decided to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem. The children who were 2 years old or younger, were killed in accordance with the information the wise men had told him, in the belief that he would have destroyed the child who had been born to be king.

The story of the killing of the children in Bethlehem is certainly consistent with Herod’s reputation as a barbaric ruler who had his wife Mariamne and three sons executed, and who was paranoid about ‘would be usurpers’ to his throne. Indeed, we are told that he was so infuriated, and, in his anger, he not only killed all the boys two years old or younger, but we are told he killed all the children of two years and under.

In verse 19 we read, “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” This is a quotation from Jeremiah 31:15 which portrayed the grief of Rachel, who was reputed to be buried at Ramah, and even in her grave, she wept at the fate of the children of Israel as they were taken to Babylon and into exile. This verse from Jeremiah is looking back to the time of the exile, and Matthew is using the same quotation as a prophecy to look forward to the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, So for Matthew these verses from Jeremiah can also be used to look forward as well as to look back.

In verse 19 and 20, when Herod died, we are told that an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and God told Joseph to take the child and his mother to Israel, for those seeking the child’s life are dead. The sequence of the words that God used are significant, that is, the child first then his mother, indicates that God’s priority was to get Jesus to Israel at all costs, and again it is not to Mary that God speaks but to Joseph.

Now when they got to Israel, they heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, and Joseph was afraid and decided that it wasn’t safe to go there, Joseph had found out about Archelaus’s reputation that he was no better than his father, which indeed he wasn’t. It was then that God again spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him not to go to Bethlehem, so Joseph took his family to Nazareth in the district of Galilee where he made his home with his family.

At the end of verse 23 we have, “So that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’” Now there is no Old Testament prophet who refers to the coming of the Messiah as a Nazorean, and the only place Jesus is referred to as a Nazorean is in today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel, there are of course other places in the New Testament where we are told that Jesus came from Nazareth. It is quite possible of course that the local people at the time of Jesus did refer to him as a Nazorean since he did come from Nazareth, but there is no prophecy in the Bible to that effect.

Now the second chapter finishes here when Jesus was a small boy of about two to three years old, and Matthew does not mention Jesus again until Jesus is about 30 years old, when he came for baptism by John. The important message for us today, is that none of this would have happened if ordinary people like Joseph were not routinely listening to God, hearing what he was saying, and then taking the appropriate action. We need to do at least twice as much listening as talking in our prayers if we are to be able to hear God speak to us, and then like Joseph take appropriate action.

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