

After Christmas, What Now?

Our second reading is Matthew 2:13-18, the account of King Herod's horrendous response to the news of the birth of Jesus:

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*¹⁸ "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."*

The birth of Jesus was a joyous celebration, involving Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, the elders in the temple, the shepherds, wise men, and even the angelic hosts of heaven. And our Christmas celebrations are at least expected to be joyful times. But they can come to an abrupt halt, involving house cleaning, bill paying, returning gifts as well as returning to more moderate eating and regular sleeping. We have to come back to the real world.

And with all of the festivities of the Christmas Season it's easy even for us Christians to overlook the fact the birth of Jesus, so widely celebrated, had some tragic consequences. We're facing the fact today that there can be no Christmas without a cross.

The birth of Jesus brought immediate opposition and hostility from King Herod, whose intention was to kill the purported King of the Jews, as made known to him by the Magi (1ff; 16). Caesar Augustus is reported to have said, in a pun, that it was better to be Herod's sow than his son. King Herod guarded his jurisdiction with a murderous jealousy, murdering his "favorite" wife, mother-in-law and three of his sons, whom he suspected of treason. He wasn't about to allow a rival king to exist in his little kingdom, so he decreed, in a furious response to the Magi's deception, that all male children two years of age and under be executed. An angel had warned Joseph to flee with Mary and the child Jesus and make the 75-mile journey to Egypt, where they were to live as fugitives until Herod's death.

King Herod typifies much of the world's response to Jesus' First Coming—the response of militant opposition, even murderous hatred. Never before has there been so much persecution of the Church as at this present time. What was true of the reception Jesus received by his own Jewish people is now true in a worldwide sense: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). Matthew's Gospel was written to a Jewish audience, which included people looking for the Messiah. But many of them rejected Jesus. Most simply ignored him.

The passion play in Oberammergau, Bavaria, has occasionally stirred anti-Semitic passions on the part of those who say the Jews bear the guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus. The truth is, we all bear the guilt for Jesus' death because our sin necessitated his death.

Because Jesus came into a sinful and spiritually dark world, under the grip of the prince of darkness, rejection and even suffering were inevitable. This was evident from the first, with King Herod's rage and edict to destroy all the young boys of Bethlehem in an attempt to eliminate a rival to his throne. But even in this blind rage of a wicked and powerful king we see the purpose of Sovereign God prevail through his deliverance of the child Jesus. This is what the psalmist prophesied:

“Why do the nations conspire
and the kings plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together against the Lord
and against his Anointed One.” But then we read:

“The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
‘I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill’” (Psalm 2:1, 2, 4, 5).

The purpose of God would be to install his Son as King on a cruel cross, on the city garbage heap in Jerusalem. Through the suffering and death of his Son, God would atone for the sin of the world and provide for the forgiveness of those who repent and salvation-deliverance for all who believe in Jesus. There would be weeping at the foot of the cross while Jesus suffered and died for our sins. But through his suffering and death God would accomplish his purpose for our salvation and for the reconciliation of the world and the redemption and re-creation of the universe.

Matthew records Herod's slaughter of innocent male children in Bethlehem, estimated to have been approximately 20-30 in number. Matthew sees even this tragedy as fulfillment of Scriptural prediction, quoting from the Prophet

Jeremiah (verse 18 and Jeremiah 31:15). The cited weeping of Rachel expresses the weeping of the mothers of the innocent male babies in Bethlehem.

These babies, these little boys two years of age and under, were the first casualties in the warfare of the kingdom of light versus the kingdom of darkness. Salvation would come by way of suffering. Mary was told by Simeon, when the baby Jesus was dedicated in the temple, that her heart would be broken by the child's suffering (Luke 2:35).

In the same way for us, a cross comes before the crown. Because he suffered we too will suffer rejection, opposition and even persecution. The path of following Jesus takes us "down to Egypt," and we live as aliens in this fallen world. Jesus said if we would come after him we must take up our cross daily and follow him (Luke 9:23ff). Jesus said that he didn't come to bring peace, but a sword, the inevitable sword that divides those who follow him from those who reject him, including members of our own families (Matthew 10:34ff; Luke 12:49ff; John 15:14ff; 16:20-33).

The way of following Jesus means we must follow him "down to Egypt," and we must share his sorrows and the sorrows of others who suffer for his name's sake. But Jesus came out of Egypt and he came out of the tomb! There was deep sorrow and grief over the murderous death of young male children in Bethlehem. But because the little child Jesus came out of Egypt, and lived among us and 33 years later, suffered and died for us, there is hope for these young children and for all children who have experienced death. This same Jesus came up out of the tomb of death as the risen and triumphant Lord. And because he lives we also shall live (John 14:19). The senseless tragedies and injustices of this present world will be "put to rights" because of Jesus' triumph and when he consummates his eternal kingdom.

The passage in Jeremiah that Matthew quotes pictures Rachel weeping over the exiles to Babylon in the context of a message of hope. Jeremiah knows that the exiles will return because he has loved them with an everlasting love and thus there is hope for a glorious future (Jeremiah 31:3, 15ff). The little boy Jesus, with Joseph and Mary, was exiled in Egypt, but when Herod died, they would return to their hometown, Nazareth, where the boy Jesus would grow up and eventually fulfill his saving mission. Jeremiah prophesied that the exiled Jews would return to their Promised Land, and that prophecy had its greater fulfillment when the boy Jesus returned from exile and its complete fulfillment when Jesus returned from death in the tomb and came forth on Easter morning as the risen, victorious Savior. Thus, the escape of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt was both historic and also prophetically symbolic and significant.

Because Jesus came out of Egypt and out of the Garden Tomb, he is Christus Victor. That means there is hope for those innocent little boys who died by the cruel swords of Herod's troops. And there is hope for every one of us here

today. Because of the Incarnation and the suffering and death of Jesus, we too may have hope of eternal and everlasting life.

Without the cross Christmas is simply a socially festive occasion. But because of the cross we have something to truly celebrate. God's eternal Son has come to save us from our sins. The child Jesus went down to Egypt. And the God man went to the cross and to the grave for us. He came out of Egypt and he came out of the grave. Christmas has at its heart a cross and also an empty tomb.

After Christmas, what now? Because Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem, lives on high, we too have life and hope for the world.