

St. Michael's 1st Sunday after Christmas 9.30 2019

“Herod the Great was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman authorities in Palestine” he was a tyrannical ruler and proved to be utterly ruthless. Matthew in his Gospel records how “Herod tried to persuade the Magi, (to whom he played host on their journey seeking the one ‘who had been born King of the Jews’) to bring him word once they had found the child.”¹ Because the wise men did not return to Herod with the information, he ordered that all the children under the age of two were to be killed.

It was to escape this massacre that Joseph and Mary fled with the infant Jesus to Egypt where they lived as refugees.

¹ Celebrating the Saints Robert Attwell

This story of the slaughter of innocent children would have resonated with Matthews readers who were familiar with story of pharaoh's slaughter of the infant boys at the time of the birth of Moses. Moses was saved (every Sunday School Child is familiar with the story of the baby in the bulrushes) and eventually he led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, to freedom in the Promised Land.

Matthew peppers his narrative with Old Testament references. The mention of Ramah is a quote from Jeremiah written at the time of the exile his readers would have been aware that Rachel's traditional burial site was at Ramah which was near Bethlehem.

It was the place where 5 centuries before the Jewish people were gathered to be marched into exile in Babylon far away from home and country.

As we read this story our thoughts are turned towards all who suffer persecution, all who live as aliens in a foreign land, those who die innocently, (whatever the cause of death,) and today our world is full of them, the innocent victims of war, terror, natural disaster, disease, cruelty, accident, abuse, oppression and the hundreds of refugees drowned trying to make the journey across the water to escape the horrors of their homeland.

And as we remember the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, we also call to mind the homeless and the refugees in our own time. All who are forced to flee their homelands and seek refuge in a foreign country or who are forced or tricked into leaving their homes and find themselves victims of human trafficking and modern-day slavery. Let me give you a few facts as published by the refugee council.

At the end of 2018 around 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced across the world. Of these, 25.9 million were refugees, whilst 41.3 million were internally displaced within their country of origin. The top ten refugee producing countries in 2018 all have poor human rights records or on-going conflict. People seeking asylum are fleeing from these conflicts and abuses, looking for safety.”²

An interesting fact of which I was unaware until I read it the other day is that according to the refugee council’s web site

“Asylum seekers do not come to the UK to claim benefits. Most know nothing about welfare benefits before they arrive and had no expectation that they would receive financial support”

² The Refugee Council web site <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>

The figures relating to human trafficking and modern-day slavery are equally, if not more horrendous. The report published by the Salvation Army shows that it is on the increase and the statistics published in the USA confirm the rise in numbers of people being exploited against their will.

In all of this it is hard to see a glimmer of hope for all the wasted lives that make up, in William Wordsworth's phrase, 'the still, sad music of humanity'.

The Holy family fleeing to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocent children they escaped from, remind us to hold fast to the truth and justice of God which Christ came to show: the way of love, the way of peace, the way of caring and compassion, the way of justice. The depths and pain of this story remind us to hold in our prayers all who go through the unbearable agony

of the death of a child or those who suffer because of human cruelty; Because there is the hope that such innocents are redeemable and redeemed. The refugee, the displaced person, the homeless and the outcast are loved by God who commanded that we should love each other as He loves us.

In 1st century Palestine the long-awaited Messiah did not bring the expected triumphal victory and release from Roman domination and oppression. The road that Jesus took was a different way He suffered innocently, died prematurely, took on and defeated death itself. This Christmas time Christ's face shines out from the crib, and we see an image of hope and love.

This baby whose birth we celebrated a few days ago came to be a light shining in the darkness of this broken and divided world. Christ the Prince

of Peace came to give us life and show us God's infinite love. Emmanuel God with us in all the messiness of this world.

Desmond Tutu said, “goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness and life is stronger than death; that victory is ours through Jesus Christ. Might will never be right. God has made us for goodness, for love, for compassion, for peace, for laughter, for gentleness, for sharing and God is in charge.”

Our challenge for 2020 is to bring that hope and compassion peace and love to this damaged and alienated world.