

First Sunday after Christmas

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Introduction

The Gospel passage for the first Sunday after Christmas Day makes deeply distressing reading. Its central event – Herod’s brutal mass infanticide– is often glossed over in our retellings of the Christmas narrative but is an inescapable part of it. Then, as now, it is the weak and vulnerable who bear the heaviest of the fall-out from fear-driven politics and the self-interested actions of the powerful. However Herod is not the only responsive agent in this passage, and the essential difference between his actions and those of Joseph provides another useful insight for considering our own responses in situations of difficulty and conflict.

Anchor question

Consider the verb ‘To Take’: what words or phrases do you commonly associate with it? Make a list and see whether they fall into any particular groupings.

Text

Matthew 2:13–23

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.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 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.”

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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“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.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Comment

There are two main agents in this story – Herod and Joseph – and the lectionary readings for year A allow us several chances to explore their actions and motives. Both men have to cope with situations in which strong negative emotions (anger and fear) are significant potential drivers of subsequent response and action. In the case of Joseph, we have already seen – in Advent 4 – how a combination of openness, generosity and careful consideration enable him to move beyond emotionally dictated responses into a place of creative possibility. Next week, the Epiphany gospel reading will allow us to reflect on the parallel journey in Herod’s story. Today’s passage shows us the consequences of those different journeys in two ways.

Firstly there is the very visual and visceral contrast between their actions towards the children in the story. Three times (vs.13, 21,& 22) Joseph takes Mary and the infant Jesus to places of safety. The text tells us nothing at all about these journeys although we might infer from certain words and phrases (‘flee’ ‘by night’) and also from the Greek word used for ‘went’ in verses 13, &21 (which has the implication of avoiding being seen), that at least one of these journeys involved some degree of difficulty and stress. Yet despite this, and presumably also despite the disruption to his own located livelihood, Joseph acts on behalf of his two powerless dependants to protect and preserve their wellbeing – actions which respond to and reinforce the imperatives of human relationality. In contrast, Herod’s actions are totally and bloodily destructive, and there is no sense of responsibility towards, or care for, the wellbeing of either the male children or their mothers and extended families. The quoted text from Jeremiah, in conveying the inconsolable grief of the women who lost their sons to Herod’s soldiers, underlines and stands in judgement against an action which is so totally devoid of any human compassionate connection.

The text though also gives an insight into the key difference in attitude which underpins these different actions. Both men ‘take’ something with respect to the children in the story, but that taking has very different implications and outcomes: one takes ‘for’ himself and the other takes ‘to’ or ‘upon’ himself. Herod, far from being simply a coarse and brutish thug, was a complex man – racially an Arab (from Idumea), religiously Jewish, culturally Greek and politically Roman, he was, at times, an astute politician (as evidenced by his dealings with Caesar Augustus) who became increasingly driven by fear about his position. Ultimately this leads to the scenario in this passage in which he takes the life of the slaughtered children as a means of buying for himself an ultimately spurious sense of safety and security. We get a strong sense of this from *anaire* – the Greek word used for the killing – which has two potential meanings: it indicates either taking away (usually violently) or taking up, and is etymologically rooted in the active form of the word *haire* – to take for oneself. `New Testament usage is exclusively connected with the former sense with one poignant exception – the taking up (i.e. adoption) of an exposed child (Moses) by Pharaoh’s daughter (Acts 7:21) – something which leads us very directly –though via a different verb – to the actions of Joseph.

The text tells us that Joseph ‘takes’ the child and his mother – but here the particular verb used (*paralamban*) brings a very different feel to the action. The primary meaning is to take to, take with or to join to one’s self i.e. to associate someone or something with oneself in a close relational way. Thus we see Joseph once again instantiating the decisions made in response to his dream at the end of chapter 1 (where *paralamban* is also used in vs.20 and 24) and choosing, this time in defiance of a different kind of danger, to confirm a relational connection with, and responsibility for, Mary and her child. An added depth of nuance comes from the secondary meaning of the verb which, by analogy also implies the assumption of

an office to be discharged. We can see this as being completely in keeping with the arc of the journey which Joseph sets out on at the end of Matthew 1: he continues to honour the commitment made in response to his first angelic visitation and we see the public culmination of this in one of the other Gospel readings for today (see the parallel reflection for the feast of the Holy Name). The precipitancy of action required in response to the message of verse 13 can be negotiated because the crucial decisions about attitude and action with respect to Mary and Jesus have already been made: Joseph already inhabits a mindset which allows him to act decisively in their best interests despite the potential costs.

Response

Identify one or more situations of tension or conflict (whether large or small) in which you are currently involved and, using your list from the first question, identify any 'taking' aspects which are part of that. Now reflect on these in the light of the two different possibilities outlined above. Are there any 'taking for' scenarios (involving yourself or others) which need to be challenged or changed? Are there any 'taking to' elements which need to be encouraged or supported?

Prayer

Fathering, Mothering God,

We pray for all children who have never known or who have lost the loving care and protection of their parents.....

For all children whose days begin and end in fear and uncertainty....

For all children who have no one to care for their comfort and wellbeing....

For all children unsheltered and uncomforted...

For all children alone and afraid....

And we pray too for all those
who have lost someone they love
through actions driven by the fear and violence of others.

Fathering, mothering God –
keep them all in your sight,
hear their cries and right their wrongs,
now and in eternity. Amen