

Christmas' darker side*Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23*

Much as many would like to linger by the manger in the stable, and bask in the angel light and starlight of Christmas, the story of Jesus, begun in Bethlehem, moves on. And so must we.

It has remained a regular fascination to me that crowds gather in Church to celebrate Christmas, but when the time comes to move on from the festival of the birth and on to the fraught reality of the days and weeks that follow, the crowds have already melted away. Sentiment rarely survives searing reality. People whose hearts may have been touched by the wonder of the nativity are reluctant to commit minds, souls, hands and feet to the journey of faith that the truth of Jesus amongst us, the incarnation, demands. I am eternally grateful to the many who come to Church over these days, and eternally saddened that their association with us is so fleeting.

For those of us belonging to the Church, who have made a commitment, the tough story in Matthew's gospel about the slaughter of the innocents of Bethlehem by Herod, and the flight of the Holy Family as refugees and immigrants from their homeland into foreign Egypt, is equally challenging. Many want the Church to be persistently bright and cheerful and major key. Not because of a shallowness of faith and commitment, but because for many the world dark enough, a frightening place with disappointment and misery that we don't want to face it let alone deal with it. Editing out pain and hardship from our experience of what faith is and can do is to water down it's powerfulness. Faith, like life, needs to find ways to hold the joy and the sorrow together; that uneasy reality of bright and dark. One without the other is only half the story. For all the brightness of the angels and the star, there is also the darkness of the murder of innocents and the brutal reality of refugee status As much a reality in our C21st world as it was in the C1st.

Next Sunday we will look at the coming of the Magi, the wise men, following the star and bringing their gifts and homage to Jesus. But their arrival is the prompt for Herod to worry at where this new infant king was to be found, and what kind of threat He would pose to Herod's rule. Jesus is in mortal danger, as the question of the Magi unleashes the violence that killed the baby boys of Bethlehem. The story of the incarnation may begin with angels' songs, but it ends with the sound of weeping women. God had planned for the saving of the world, His goal. It was humanity that brought about the suffering because of fear. God is not separate from the weeping women, indifferent to their plight. God, in Jesus, is intertwined with the pain and suffering of the world. God, in Jesus, stands alongside those who weep, and inspires help. Like our church's support of the David Nott foundation, training doctors to bringing healing to the many hurting places of the world. In desperate times, desperate help comes. We may wish it were otherwise, that there would be no need to make the kind of response to help so many who hurt and suffer. What causes the pain - humanity. What addresses the pain - humanity in many places inspired by God Who stands for peace and wants us, with Him, to work towards it. If God waved a wand and 'magicked' all the hurt and wrongs away, we would learn nothing, we would not have changed. What God looks for is a change in human beings, the change in us, not only to *will* peace and healing and wholeness, but to work peace and healing and wholeness, and to sustain it. Why does God choose this way? In truth I do not know, and it's something to ask God when we get to heaven. But rather than wait till then, there is work to be done now. Nobody else is going to do it apart from us. In the big places and the small places where hurt is being lived out in our world, our community, our families, our friends today.

As I pondered the knock-on effect of Christmas, I wondered if part of what the light of the nativity does is to show the darkness of our world. We can't hide from it, or sweep it away, or pretend it

is not there. We might wish it otherwise, like this hard story of murdered boys in Bethlehem and the desperate flight of the Holy Family as illegal immigrants, but it will not be glossed over. We are forced to look at an example of brutality over 2,000 years ago, and see in its bitter, blood-soaked truth some of the stories of our own time.

Nearly eight years ago I visited Gaza. It's on the route the Holy Family would have taken on their flight to Egypt. An ancient city, it was one of the places inhabited by the Philistines, from whose name the name Palestine may have come. Nothing much remains of the city I visited, flattened by the bombs and bullets of Netanyahu's Israel in a bitter war that still has not come to a proper ceasefire with enough help and aid and support reaching the most desperate of people. Gaza was pretty much knocked about when I was there. I remember sharing a story with you of visiting a paediatric hospital, specialising in helping children scarred by the psychological trauma of war and violence. The hospital was supported by the Church of Scotland. After the therapy session was over the girls, all about 8 years old, were seated in front of a screen. A film was run showing children laughing. The medical staff then encouraged the children watching to copy what they were seeing and hearing. They were teaching 8-year-old girls how to laugh again. I learned some time later that the English word *gauze* the finely woven medical cloth, may have come from the Arabic word غزة (ghazza), though some dispute the etymology. Gaza was an ancient centre for weaving and a fine type of silk known as *gazzatum* was imported from Gaza as early as the C13th. I wondered how many wounds have been dressed, by Gaza, then and now. From that dark and wounded place, a kind of healing.

The dark side of Christmas is that in our world whether we are thinking globally, or locally, there will be those who have forgotten how to laugh. Life has been too hard, too unfair, too grim, too brutal. As some of those who came to our Blue Christmas service last Sunday knew, this is not

always the happiest or easiest time of the year. We dimmed the main lights in Church, but ironically the place seemed brighter because of the Christmas tree lights, and the light that illuminated the Burne Jones window when it gets dark.

One person said as they were leaving that whilst the service hadn't taken away their hurt or pain, they were grateful that churches like ours, and people like you, stood by people and did what was possible to help, even if it was only sitting alongside, and showing that you not only cared, but first you noticed and heard.

On the dark side of Christmas, we kept the light on.

Who sat with Rachel and the other mothers lamenting the murder of their children in Bethlehem?
Who consoled Mary and Joseph as they fled for their lives to be foreigners in a foreign land, homeless, weary, outcast?

Who will be helping the children of Gaza today, in the shattered remains of their city? Who will be comforting bombed Ukrainians, and Russians? Who will be sitting alongside the darkened homes of Jewish families near Bondi beach?

Who will be gentle with the people preparing for the six funerals I will be taking in January?

On the dark side of Christmas, who keeps the light on for all those people, and for more?

It was on the dark side of Christmas that angels came back to Joseph to warn him to find safety.

It was on the dark side of Christmas the Holy Family may have travelled through Gaza, the place of gauze, and I believe would have been helped by strangers they met. It was on the dark side of Christmas that they arrived in Egypt, and were helped again.

We may be on the dark side of Christmas, but we are passed the Solstice, and the days are lengthening, and brightening, into a New Year. It will hold darkness I know. But it will hold light also, I have no doubt. Beyond the darkness, always light. How will the Christmas message sound

in our hearts if we help create a world in which the baby Jesus will never again be refugee Jesus?
When 8-year-old girls no longer need to be taught to laugh. And when we, with our mixture of
sorrow and joy, might be the help and the light for loved ones and strangers, because we believe,
BELIEVE, that we are not made for darkness, but for light! We are beyond the dark side of
Christmas. Shine!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen