

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 5”
Matthew 2:13-23

As we move on in Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus – still in the birth stories, or “the Christmas bit” – the real baddie moves to the centre of the stage. We caught a glimpse of Herod the Great last week and now he comes into sharper focus with the act for which he is probably best known. But let’s just refresh our memories about the man – one the great villains of human history. Herod was born in 73BC and ruled Judea from 40BC to 4BC. He was originally an Idumean, descended from the Edomites, the long-time enemies of the Jews since an act of betrayal during the time when they were taking possession of the Promised Land.

He held a number of positions within the government of the Roman Province of Palestine, most of which were marked by brutal suppression of dissent, and eventually the Senate, advised by Anthony and Octavian, gave him the title of “King of the Jews” – so you can understand his response when those Magi from Persia came looking for the new King of the Jews. Herod had five different wives, beginning with Doris and ending with Cleopatra of Jerusalem, by whom he had a large number of children. Despite his pagan origins he professed conversion to Judaism, but the people never really took him to their hearts, especially when he massacred the Hasmonean family who were the rightful heirs to the crown.

As we said last week, he did initiate a great programme of building and what we might call today regeneration, including a magnificent new Temple in Jerusalem – although, never really shaking off his pagan heritage, he built quite a few temples to other gods as well. Again as we said last week, he was extremely paranoid about his position and eliminated anyone who appeared to be a threat, which included his wife, three sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law and a number of uncles, as well as hundreds, if not thousands (one historian suggests over 3,000), of political opponents and dissidents. When he realised that his own death was approaching, he was worried that no-one would mourn his passing, so he got his soldiers to round up a large group of the country’s leaders and gave orders that, at his death, they were to be executed too, so that there would at least be some weeping when he died. On his death, he decreed that the kingdom should be split between his three sons, Philip, Herod Antipas and Archelaus.

Despite the few positive things about his reign, there is no doubt that Herod was an evil man. And that comes over quite clearly in this part of the story, which we probably know as “The Slaughter of The Innocents”, the killing of all the young boys in Bethlehem, so that Herod could be sure that any threat to his power was utterly eliminated. (He failed, of course.) The section we’ve just read is made up of three brief episodes, each of which ends with a reference back to the prophets and has echoes of the story of Moses from the Old Testament. We’re not going to dwell on the Moses aspect this morning, but you might like to hold that in your mind as we look through this section.

Firstly, of course, there is **the escape to Egypt**. Once again, Joseph has a dream in which an angel tells Joseph what God wants him to do. The angel explains why Joseph is to take this rather drastic course of action – Herod is looking for Jesus and intends to kill him. Once again, Joseph obeys without, apparently, any hesitation. Egypt was probably the best bet for him, really, as it was only about 75 miles from Bethlehem to the border and there was already a large community of Jews living in the country – some historians put the number at around one million. Matthew rounds this episode off with a quotation from *Hosea 11:1*, looking forward, no doubt, to the return of Jesus and his family from Egypt.

Then we have **the slaughter of the innocents**. Herod cannot be sure exactly how old Jesus will be, so to be on the safe side, he takes a maximum age and orders his men to kill all the boys under that age. At this time the population of Bethlehem was fairly small, so it is estimated that the number killed could have been as low as 12 or as high as 30. The odd thing is, as someone said to me after the service last week, Bethlehem is a very short distance from Jerusalem and you would have thought that Herod might have been able to find out what was going on a bit more easily and so been more focused in his violence. But still, this is what happened and this act of appalling savagery took place, again linked by Matthew to a quotation from the Old Testament (*Jeremiah 31:15*).

As we read these stories today and find ourselves shocked by the brutality described by Matthew, we need to recognise that such things are still happening today in different parts of the world – not least in the very area where these events first took place. Suspicion, paranoia, desperation to hang on to power, blind devotion to an ideology or to a despotic leader all have consequences, not least the violent destruction of innocent people. Those who like to suggest that our world is more civilised than the world of Herod have ample evidence to the contrary on the nightly news, whether it's deaths by hand to hand fighting in Syrian villages or by computerised American drones in the borderlands of Afghanistan or by western shareholders in pharmaceutical companies withholding cheap drugs from the developing world.

Anyway, back to the story. The third episode is **the return to Nazareth**. Yet another angelic dream for Joseph and the welcome news that Herod the Great is dead. No longer is Jesus' life in danger, so the little family can make their way back to Judea. When they get back to that area, though, Joseph learns that one of Herod's surviving sons, Archelaus, is now on the throne, so he moves on up to Nazareth, out of Archelaus's area (but into an area ruled by another of Herod's sons, Antipas, whom Joseph must have considered less of a threat). So Jesus returns to the place which we know from Luke's Gospel was Joseph's home town and he is forever known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Matthew closes the story off with another reference back to "*the prophets*", suggesting that this, too, was foretold as part of God's plan. The only trouble is, you won't find this quotation anywhere in the Old Testament, nor any explicit mention of the Messiah as coming from Nazareth. It's thought that Matthew assumed this because a number of prophets talk of the Messiah coming from an obscure place and Nazareth was certainly an obscure place at this time. Remember Nathanael's question in *John 1:46* – "*Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"? Another suggestion is that the Messiah is often referred to as a shoot or a root from the branch of David's family and the Hebrew word for shoot sounds very similar to Nazareth, so it may be a play on words. However, Jesus is now safely home with his mother and father (and soon some brothers and sisters as well) and that is where he stays until the next part of the story in chapter 3, around thirty years later.

In these opening two chapters we have learned about Joseph and his obedience, about the Magi and their worship and humility, about Herod and his violence and brutality. We haven't discovered much about Jesus yet, other than the significance of his names. But as with any of the stories in the Bible, we do find out something about God, something about his activity in this situation which we can learn from and apply to our own situation as his followers today. Through all that we have thus far read in Matthew's Gospel, we can see God's **Promises**, his **Providence** and his **Protection**. Let's reflect on those in the time that we have left.

1. PROMISES

We've noted every week so far that Matthew is very keen to link this story of Jesus to the words of the Hebrew prophets and preachers which were preserved in the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. From the inclusion of that amazing genealogy to the phrases with which he punctuates his story, there are these references back to the ways in which God had set this whole thing up. We've suggested that this partly to do with reassuring the new Christians, followers of Jesus from a Jewish background, that their new found faith is, in fact, a continuation of what they've always believed and that the Kingly Messiah, the Christ, whom the prophets foretold is now here in the person of Jesus.

But it's also to do with the idea that God always keeps his promises. From the moment he banished the first human beings from their earthly paradise in Eden, God has promised that he will deal with evil and that he will provide a way of escape from the consequences, power and effect of sin. It's taken a while and there have been an awful lot of twists and turns on the way, but now that promise is coming to fulfilment. Jesus is born as a fulfilment of God's promise. Some of those Old Testament prophets and preachers – and many of the people who heard them – must have wondered just what God was on about:

after all, there didn't seem to be much evidence that God was keeping his promise as Assyrians invaded, as Persians decimated their population, as the whole nation was marched off into exile. It's difficult to see just what God's up to when the royal house of David is tearing itself apart with assassinations and palace coups and the people of Israel are fighting with the people of Judah. Through those centuries of apparent darkness it would have been very difficult indeed to hang on to God's promise that he was going to send a Saviour and things were going to work out for the best in the end. But he did!

It can sometimes seem very difficult for us to believe that God is going to deliver on his promise to eliminate evil from the world or that he is going to keep the promise he gave to us as a church or as an individual that something specific is going to happen. But he will. He always does keep his promises in the end. And that refers to the, if you like, "general" promises which he makes in the Bible which are for all people – that he will judge the world, that he will save men and women from the consequences of their sin, that he will establish his Kingdom, that he will come again. There is enough evidence of his keeping promises already to encourage us that he will eventually deliver. And Jesus is perhaps the most important of those fulfilled promises – his birth, his death, his resurrection – so we can see that God does keep those promises, even though it can take an awfully long time to actually bring them to fruition.

And it can refer to the specific, personal promises he makes to us. Sometimes he speaks to us through a particular word from the Bible, sometimes through a deeply held conviction of his Spirit within us, sometimes even through a powerful dream (as he did with Joseph). And we may be hanging on to that promise that something particular is going to happen – one of our children will turn to Christ, there will be a healing, we will be led into some kind of special opportunity to serve God – all kinds of things – but it doesn't seem to be happening. Hold on! It took many centuries for Jesus to arrive. It must have seemed strange to Mary and Joseph that after all the palaver of having this child he was about to be killed. It probably seemed ages that Joseph and Mary were in Egypt away from their friends and family. But in the end, God delivered. He kept his promises – and we can dare to believe that he will keep his promises to us, in his own time and in his own way.

2. PROVIDENCE

And linked to that, of course, is God's providence. Paul reminds the Romans in *Romans 8:28* that "*in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*". And we can certainly see that in this part of the story. God has his plan, plans that he has confirmed in his promises to us, and nothing is going to thwart them. Just think about what we've already seen in Matthew's Gospel. God promised a Messiah and despite all those potential hiccups in the genealogy – barren women, illegitimate children, odd relationships and so on – and despite the fact that Mary wasn't married, he brought his Son into the world. And then, having ensured that Jesus was born he managed to overcome the threat of death and exile. Herod's plans failed and the exile in Egypt was short-lived. In sometimes amazing, sometimes mundane ways, God's will is accomplished and his providence is seen to be at work.

And it still is. God has his plans for us. He may have let us in on those through his promises to us. They may be just vague hopes that we have of his will being done in our lives. But he will accomplish them. When Joseph and Mary were trudging down to Egypt after all the excitement of the visit of the Magi and all the traumas of the pregnancy and birth, they must have been wondering exactly what was going on. Joseph may well have been questioning whether his dreams were authentically from God or whether he was just reading too much into them. Mary may well have been wondering what the angel was going on about when he said that all nations would call her blessed – this certainly didn't feel much like that. But they hung on in there and trusted God and his providence saw them through. And then they could look back on it all and see just how it all fitted together – which is really what Matthew is helping us to do with his Gospel.

Hang on in there. God's plans for your life will not be thwarted. God's plans for your family will not be thwarted. God's plans for this church will not be thwarted. It will work out in the end. I'm sure many of us can look back on periods in our lives when we've wondered just what on earth was going on, but with hindsight we can identify the providence of God at work. We can say with Paul, "*in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" – and actually see how that has happened.

3. PROTECTION

And again, linked to that is his protection. That's a pretty hefty part of his providence. He watches over Joseph, Mary and Jesus, protecting them so that his promises can be fulfilled. Jesus is protected from the violence and death that was coming his way through Herod's men. We see how those who came before him in the line from Abraham were protected and provided for in order that the plan could come to fruition. God stood by his people. He stood over them – usually unseen, but sometimes very obviously with angels and other supernatural phenomena. And because of that his plans for his people, his plans for the world could be accomplished.

That's part of what lies behind the two names we looked at a couple of weeks ago – Jesus, who saves: Emmanuel who stands with us. "*Jesus knows our every weakness*" as the old hymn puts it, but he stands with us and helps to deal with the problems and the pain. Tom Wright, in his comments on this passage, writes, "*Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk or talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head.*" He is with us and he shares our pain. God watches over us and stands with us.

The holy family had to cope with a fair amount of anxiety and trauma in these early years of Jesus' life. It must have seemed hard. They must have questioned why this was happening to them. They must have wondered what was going to happen next. But ultimately God protected them. The danger never finally materialised. The worst case scenario never actually happened. And that can be the case with us as we put our faith in the God who keeps his promises and, in his great providence, protects and shelters us until we are safely with him for eternity. Sometimes it's really tough trying to keep that faith alive – but in the end it is always going to be worth it.

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The escape to Egypt. Egypt was 75 miles from Bethlehem and there was already a large community of Jews living in the country. Matthew rounds this episode off with a quotation from *Hosea 11:1*.

The slaughter of the innocents. At this time the population of Bethlehem was small, so the number killed was between 12 and 30. Matthew uses a quotation from *Jeremiah 31:15*.

The return to Nazareth. The family can make their way back to Judea. Joseph learns that one of Herod's sons, Archelaus, is on the throne, so he moves on up to Nazareth, out of Archelaus's area.

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Questions for discussion

1. We think of Herod as being particularly brutal and barbaric, but assume things are better today. Is that true? Why/why not?
2. Matthew adapts quotations from the Old Testament and often uses them out of context. Does that invalidate his use of them? Why/why not?
3. Why should we believe God will keep his promises? Can you share any examples from your own experience?
4. What evidence do we have that God’s plans will not be thwarted?
5. Isn’t providence just another word for coincidence?
6. How can we hold on to God’s promise of protection when it seems as if everything is actually going wrong?
7. Is there anything that has particularly struck you in these first two chapters of Matthew’s Gospel?