

I doubt that it ever occurred to the first Christians that one day, the story of Jesus' birth might be sentimentalized into little more than feel-good baby stories, or images of religious perfection. But, if anyone had an inkling, it was Matthew, and the horrible story about the slaughter of innocent children was written by him to dispel any fantasies his readers may have had. There really isn't much to get gushy about in any of the gospel stories of the nativity: Luke describes unmarried displaced persons struggling to make it to a dirty cow shed to give birth. But Matthew's story really takes the cake with its tyranny, terrorism, exile, and murdered children.

Matthew of course could not envisage that our generation might be oblivious to the shock, and even offence, caused by his suggestion that it was these foreign pagan mystics, and not the Jewish priests and biblical scholars, who first recognized the baby as God's anointed one. But with this follow up story of what happened when the visitors accidentally tipped off mad King Herod about this birth, he succeeded in crafting a story too chilling and gruesome for any commercial Christmas tableau. You will never see this part of the Christmas story on a card, or in a pageant, and because of that, this story is the least well known of all the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. And even where it is known, it is certainly the least understood.

And yet, is it not this story, of all the nativity stories, that most clearly connects the birth of Jesus with some of the burning issues in our own time? A generation of children stolen from their families on government orders and executed; refugees fleeing violent oppression and seeking asylum in other countries; puppet regimes employing massive violence to achieve political ends; killing large numbers of people in an attempt to hunt down just one person; and explaining away civilian deaths as justifiable collateral damage. It all sounds eerily like you might read it in the paper next week, doesn't it?

Not only is this the story that makes the strongest connections between the nativity and the harsh realities of the world, it is also the story that most clearly relates the birth of Jesus to the bigger themes of why God would choose to come among us as a helpless baby. For Matthew, the story of the birth of Jesus is part of the Easter gospel, the beginning of a long arc of a stories about God liberating his people from tyranny, slavery, oppression and death. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, the central character in Matthew's version of the birth stories is not Mary, but Joseph. In Matthew's account the angel announces the birth to Joseph in a dream. In this story, Joseph has three more dreams in which he receives messages from God: telling him to take his wife and baby to Egypt; telling him to bring them back again; and telling them not to settle back in Judea but to move north to settle in Nazareth. Already for the hearer who is steeped in the stories of the Jewish faith, memories are being evoked. This is not the first dreamer named Joseph who has taken his family to Egypt to avoid death. More than a thousand years earlier a man named Joseph, renowned for his ability to interpret dreams, had taken his aging father, Jacob, and his eleven brothers and their families to Egypt to avoid death.

Egypt has always had a crucial place in Jewish self-understanding. To the Jewish mind, Egypt was a place of slavery, of oppression, of suffering. And the story of coming out of Egypt was nothing less than the central story of the faith, the birth of their nation, the great liberation, God's decisive action for his chosen people, bringing them out of captivity and leading them to a new hope, a new future, a promised land.

And the Exodus story has a central hero who the stories tell was specially protected from birth. For when this central hero was only a baby, a wicked king decreed that all the male Hebrew babies under

the age of two were to be killed, and it was only the covert actions of this baby's parents that enabled him to survive the slaughter and live to lead the people out of Egypt into the promised land.

So the story of the flight to Egypt and the return from there was about a whole lot more than just a very obscure prophecy about calling a son out of Egypt. And the story of the slaughter of the innocents was about a whole lot more than just some prophet's vision of grieving mothers. These stories tap straight in to the most important stories in the Jewish faith. Every Jewish family recited and even enacted the stories of the escape from Egypt every year at Passover. It was more familiar to them than the Christmas stories are to us. Every Hebrew kid grew up on stories of Moses floating in the bulrushes to avoid the slaughter of the infants, and of the grown Moses coming out of hiding after the death of the Pharaoh who had sought to kill him. Matthew's readers and listeners weren't going to miss the point.

Jesus, Matthew is saying, is God's chosen agent of liberation, just as Moses was. And there is no doubt that the people were looking for another liberator. For more than four hundred years Israel had been under the thumb of foreign powers; first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks and now the Romans. Any story about a baby, born of the line of David in the city of David, who somehow escapes the slaughter of every male Hebrew child under the age of two, who is hidden till the death of a vengeful king, and who symbolically comes out of Egypt into the promised land, is a story which is going to quickly capture the imagination of Jewish listeners longing for the promised Messiah of God who would come like Moses and lead the chosen people to freedom once again.

And so in its context Matthew's message was a real message of hope, loaded with signs of promise. It was a message of real good news for a real oppressed people. God is acting in human history again, just as in the time of Moses. God has heard the cries of the suffering and has seen the injustice that his people are being subjected to and has anointed a liberator to cast off the yoke of oppression and lead them to freedom. And as Matthew will tell us later, unlike Moses, this liberator will be with us forever. Matthew's story starts with the promise of Emmanuel, God is with us, and closes 28 chapters later with the promise repeated, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This act of liberation is not a onetime event that can be completed in one place in one lifetime. This act of liberation may have begun with the baby in Bethlehem, but it is to be continued by all those who would bear the name of Christ in every place where there is suffering, distress, injustice, poverty, despair and oppression.

So, Matthew connects the birth stories to these stories to illuminate the significance of the birth of Jesus for a faith centered on his death and resurrection. And in the process he illuminates for us how and why we gather at this table to not only celebrate the whole of Christ's life from birth to death and resurrection, but also to call to mind and prayer all those who have lost home or family or freedom to the violence used every day by the world's power mongers. And as we weave all these stories together at the table, we encounter again the Christ who hears the cries of all who suffer, comes to lead us all out of fear and slavery and into the promised land of God, and promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age.