

“Where is God when Innocent Children Die?” The Massacre of the Innocents

A Sermon preached at Holy Trinity Church, Combe Down, Bath, 28.12.14

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¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

**¹⁸“A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”**

Our Bible passage today tells us the next part of the Christmas story, and it's about as far removed from our normal, cosy view of Christmas as it's possible to get.

“At least six soldiers entered”

“There was chaos everywhere”

“I tried to hide, and I called for my mother”

“We saw children falling down, crying and screaming”.

Words of terror, confusion, shock, and grief. We can readily imagine these being spoken by those who witnessed the terrible killing of the children by Herod's soldiers. But these words were actually spoken in 2014 by those who witnessed the killing of 133 children and 9 staff at a school in Peshawar in Pakistan. These children were murdered - not by a distant king in ancient times, but by the Taliban just 12 days ago.

The Song of Zechariah in Luke 1, says of Jesus:

“In the tender compassion of our God

the dawn from on high shall break upon us
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death
And to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

If ever we found the way of peace, we have lost it again. And we may well ask ourselves: where was the ‘tender compassion of our God’ when those school children were killed? And indeed, where was it when Herod slaughtered the Jewish babies all those years ago?

This is an almost impossibly tough question, but it is one that our passage today forces us to ask:
Where is God when innocent children die?

Maybe we can go to the Bible to help us. In our passage, Matthew clearly wants us to look at the OT for clues. He quotes Jeremiah, who himself borrows a character from the Book of Genesis to express the grief of his own time: the Babylonian exile. The figure of the weeping Rachel conjures up images of Israel’s captivity, sorrow and death. Perhaps it is significant that Rachel herself died, in childbirth, on her way to Bethlehem (see Gen 35). But perhaps more significantly, Rachel was the mother of three of the tribes of Israel, and her first-born son was Joseph. It was through Joseph that the Israelites ended up in Egypt. So Matthew seems to be pointing us, ultimately, to the story of the Exodus – the central, great, salvation story of Israel.

Both our passage in Matthew 2 and the Exodus story present us with: first, an oppressive king, second, the killing of children, and third, with an Egyptian escape.

The first parallel comes between Pharaoh and Herod. Both were insecure kings who felt threatened, and swore to kill the first-born baby boys among the Jews. But neither managed to kill every baby. In both stories, one particular baby slipped through the net, and grew up to lead his people to freedom.

In Exodus, it was Moses – the one who evaded death by being hidden in the bulrushes, and subsequently taken in by Pharaoh’s family. And, in Matthew’s gospel, we see Jesus, who escaped through a dream given to his earthly father, Joseph.

Moses, of course, went on to lead his people, Israel, out of Egypt where they had been slaves. But not before another mass killing had taken place. Just as the Egyptians had killed the first-born Jews, so their own firstborn children (including Pharaoh’s own son) would be killed before Moses and the others would be allowed to go.

But how does this story help us, when it comes to answering our question: where is God when innocent children die?

In the Exodus story, the killing of the Egyptian children is carried out by something called 'the Destroyer'. In Exodus 12, this 'Destroyer' is seen as something/someone that is, in some way, sent by God to bring death upon the Egyptians. But the Destroyer spares the Jews because of the lamb's blood on their doorposts. (Exodus 12:23)

So the message in Exodus 12, appears to be this:

Firstly: when people (Pharaoh and the Egyptians) kill the children of God's people: they themselves will suffer the same fate, an eye for an eye.

Secondly: this killing is in some way commanded and at least partly carried out by him. Exodus 12:23 again, says: 'When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians'. Then comes the reference to the 'Destroyer'. But who or what 'the Destroyer' is and what part it has, and indeed its relation to God himself: all are left unclear.

Thirdly: only God's chosen people will be saved, and God will provide the way.

This is a kind of Exodic, OT theology of justice and salvation. So what does our passage in Matthew have to say in response to this? Do we take the OT paradigm and simply overlay it onto the Jesus narrative? Is precisely the same thing happening, or something new?

Let's look at it.

There are a few interesting differences, when it comes to the context of the horrible killing of the children:

In Exodus, the Jews are in slavery in another country (Egypt).

In Matthew, the Jews are in slavery in their *own* country (because the Romans are in charge).

In Exodus, the Jews escape *from* Egypt – from the land of slavery to the land of freedom

In Matthew, Jesus and his parents escape *to* Egypt (the historical land of slavery) *from* Israel.

In Exodus, Moses grows up in a royal palace: a poor Jew disguised as an Egyptian prince.

In Matthew, Jesus grows up in poverty: a king, as it were, disguised as a pauper.

So, there is a bit of a turning of the tables here: there are clear parallels, but things are already rather upside down.

In Exodus we also have a fairly tribal, or nationalistic viewpoint. In Exodus, the formula is fairly simple: Israelites = God's people, Egyptians = not God's people. By the time we get to Matthew 2, however, the net is widening somewhat. The wise men, who keep the location of the baby Jesus secret from Herod, unwittingly provoking him to anger, are not Jewish prophets, but pagans, outsiders, who have not, until now, had much to do with articulating the royal story of Israel.

In drawing these outlines, I am not trying to set the Old Testament against the New in a dismissive way. Rather, I want to suggest that Matthew's use of OT prophecy and narrative parallel is inviting us to see the story of Jesus within its Jewish historical context, but also to notice the ways in which a new, fresh and clarified vision of reality is coming. Jesus shows us the image of the invisible God [Colossians 1:15] – a transfiguring vision that means we must read the OT in the light of the New; particularly, I would argue, as regards the character and actions of God. As well as being a clarified vision of God, Jesus is also a clarified vision of humanity: he is the new and better Moses, who not only leads a single people out of national slavery, but one who leads the whole of creation out of its bondage to sin and death.

So as regards our central question, then, the unfolding vision in Matthew's gospel teach us two new perspectives on tragedy, perspectives which touch us in a deeper way than the Exodus story.

Firstly, Matthew is very clear that the author of this act of violence and terror is Herod. He names him, so that we can be in no doubt. It is Herod, in his fury and fear, who kills the children of Israel. He is like Shakespeare's Macbeth – killing and killing in order to try and hold on to his slipping power and position. His rule of tyranny is on its way out, but it drags innocents with it in its evil wake. It is Herod, not God, who is the death-dealer. The ambiguity of the 'Destroyer' figure - worryingly close to being identified with God the Father in the Exodus story – is all but removed in Matthew. I know this makes us ask uncomfortable questions about the weight and unity of Scripture. But I do believe that as *Christians* we must read the OT through the lens of the New, and supremely, through the lens of Jesus himself.

Secondly, as we have seen, Matthew tells us that the killing of the children is in some way, a fulfilment of biblical prophecy. How are we to read this? One answer is to say that, plain and simple, God is in control of everything, and no matter how ethically abhorrent we believe these things to be, they are ultimately part of God's 100% pre-ordained 'plan'. That might help us get closer to the God of Exodus, apparently killing with his Destroyer those that stand in his way. That might also help us deal with tragedy – especially such seemingly random tragedies as the crash in Glasgow last week, or even the senseless evil of the Peshawar massacre – we can take comfort, because while we don't understand it, at least God is still in control. A random and senseless universe is too scary to

countenance, so we say: “everything must be controlled by God, and he must have a reason for it”, and then we breathe an uneasy sigh of relief.

But I think there is another, better answer. The problem with the view I’ve just stated, is that it makes God subject to his ‘plan’: he’s not really in control of events, they are in control of him! Everything must go according to ‘THE PLAN’. Really then, the ‘THE PLAN’ is God, not God himself. It becomes a *real* problem when it comes to evil. Is the killing of children ever, as it were, part of “God’s plan”? Just let that question hover over you for a while.

A more nuanced way of putting it is to say that God ‘permits’ evil to happen, because he is sovereignly committed to human freewill. And yet, in his wonder and power, God brings a redemptive purpose out of even the direst of cruelty. God is not - I increasingly feel - constantly meddling with the universe in order to force it into his will. He *does* intervene of course, but— this intervention comes, as we see here in Matthew’s gospel, through a dream, a warning, a prayer, a breath of the Spirit guiding us. This is what I think we see in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles: the yeast of the kingdom spreads through patience, prayer and proclamation, encounter-by-life-changing-encounter. So we pray, as Jesus taught us, ‘thy will be done’, because, in our violent world of infanticide, God’s will is done with such tragic rarity.

This is where the point about prophecy comes in: one can read all the prophecies in Matthew and feel like the prophecies themselves are driving events, almost just for the sake of it! This is making God subject to his ‘plan’ again. But really, I think, Matthew draws out all these prophetic fulfilments, because the whole context and thrust of the prophetic imagination simply makes some sense of what is happening. That is why we can go from Jeremiah to Moses to Rachel (with a bit of Hosea thrown in): because violence, fear and killing are, sadly, the story of the whole human race when it is left to its own sinful devices. Do you know how the Pakistani authorities responded to the Peshawar attack? They have reinstated the death penalty for terrorism, which had previously been suspended. Reports came out recently saying that 500 terrorists are to be executed over the coming months. So the killing continues, in the name of ‘justice.’

Matthew, seeing all this, goes to the prophets who say: “Where there are tyrants, where there is oppression, where there is fear, Rachel and all the mothers of the world will constantly be weeping. Where is the king who will save us from this endless cycle of violence?”

We know of course, the answer to this question, and so does Matthew. Jesus Christ – God incarnate – is the king who, by dying, will break the cycle of killing forever. What we see in Jesus, is the God who stands in solidarity with, and as the representative of, *all* murdered children the world over, Jewish and Egyptian, Christian and Muslim. The incarnation of Christ – God’s coming to earth in the

flesh, at Christmas – this shows us that God is no longer to be ambiguously portrayed as one who seems aloof to the cries of children of an enemy; as one who holds the Destroyer on a leash. He must, at one level, allow evil, yes, because he would rather die than squash human freedom completely, and so re-enter the cycle of violence himself. He is the one who suffers with all the children of the earth who are made to suffer by the oppressor.

“But,” you might protest, “Jesus *didn't* show solidarity. He *wasn't* killed by Herod's henchmen – he escaped to Egypt! God saved him through the dream!”

That is true, but only in a limited sense. Jesus only managed to escape death for a few more years. By the time Jesus was my age, he had already been murdered. Jesus' death on a cross at the hands of yet more oppressive authorities (ironically, both pagan and Jewish, in a sick parody of Jesus' promised universal kingdom) proved for all time that God suffers with us and for us. The cross is the high point of the Biblical revelation of who God really is. The cross shows that all the first-born, all the sons and all the daughters of the earth have a Saviour: Jesus, himself the murdered first-born Son of God.

So where is God when innocent children die? I believe the best answer we can give is this: He is dying with them, and for them, eternally, through the cross, which *is his very nature*: co-suffering, self-emptying, ever-hoping love. Jesus' resurrection and his coming judgement of all the nations, whatever else it may be, holds out the offer of new life and freedom to all God's children: in Egypt, in Israel, in Peshawar and to the ends of the earth. Whether we face him as innocent victim, or as violent perpetrator, we shall all have to face him, one day. And I pray and hope that his loving grace shall prevail, enough for me, and enough for us all.

Let me finish with a moving and troubling poem by Malcolm Guite, called *Refugee*, which is part of his series of sonnets for the church year. As we listen to this, let us lift our hearts in prayer for those suffering in the world, and commit ourselves to work for the freedom of all people to receive the hope that Jesus brings.

Refugee

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,

Or cosy in a crib beside the font,

But he is with a million displaced people

On the long road of weariness and want.

For even as we sing our final carol

His family is up and on that road,

Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,

Glancing behind and shouldering their load.

Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower

Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,

The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,

And death squads spread their curse across the world.

But every Herod dies, and comes alone

To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.

From Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*, (London: Canterbury Press, 2012.) www.malcolmguite.wordpress.com