

ADDRESS

29 December 2019

1st Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 63.7-9 The gracious deeds of the Lord
 Matthew 2.13 – 21 Holy Family in Egypt; suffering of the innocent

Some of you know that my younger son is a priest of the Anglican church in the United States. He ministers in the deep south, in Louisiana. In the 2016 election Louisiana's eight votes in the Electoral College went to Donald Trump.

So I designed a T-shirt to send him for Christmas. I liked it so much I had another one printed for myself . . .

Christopher says he can't wear his T-shirt outside. He does not want to be lynched. But he does wear it around the house as a reminder of his priestly vocation.

What a great New Year's resolution this is! At a time when religion is under attack, when many people want believers to be silent, when we seem to need a new law to allow us to profess our faith, the people of God need to make God great again -- in our lives, in our community, in our nation.

Today's Gospel reading takes us to the dark side of Christmas – after the manger, and the star, and the shepherds and the wise men, after the proclamation of the birth of the prince of peace, the joy of the whole earth, the focus of our faith, the sign of God's everlasting love, we have the exile of Jesus in Egypt and the murder of the boys of Bethlehem.

We can party at Christmas, but afterwards comes the hangover.

Many of us may have already experienced the dark side of Christmas past – Christmas without our beloved partner, without a dear friend, without one of our children, in hospital or taken from us by death or by dissension in the family. And there is the Christmas we cannot fully enjoy because of our bad health, or because we need to care for someone else in bad health.

As always, we have the choice – we can turn inwards and grieve for our loss, or we can turn to God and find God with us in our grief.

Many people have asked, why did God allow the wicked king Herod drive his infant son into exile? Where was God when Herod killed all the innocent young children of Bethlehem to secure his throne? Where was God in the Holocaust? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Some scholars tell us not to be concerned, because the events did not happen; they say the Biblical stories were written to make a theological point

– just as Jacob and his sons were driven into Egypt to save them from death, so that they could become a unique blessing for all people (Gen. 43), so was his descendant Jesus. *Out of Egypt I have called my son.*

-- just as Moses was saved from the massacre of the Hebrew children to become the saviour of his people, (Exodus 1.22) so was Jesus, to become the Saviour of all people.

Other scholars tell us that the so-called massacre was no big deal – they say that Bethlehem was a little village, and that the number of children killed was probably no more than 20, not the 10 000 or the 144 000 of mediaeval church tradition.

Surely the number is not the point –for the mothers and fathers of Bethlehem losing even one child would be an experience they may never have recovered from, just as it is today for any parent who loses a child in a cot death or in a road accident or from cancer or a tumor. To see your child murdered by a soldier would be even more horrific.

Again, Matthew presents the story as another episode in Israel's recurrent periods of suffering. Rachel is the mother-figure of Israel, to speak of Rachel weeping for her children is like saying 'Australia grieves on Anzac Day' or 'Britannia rules the waves'.

The Old Testament tells the story of humankind as a story of alternating light and darkness – we have seen that in our Sunday readings over the past few weeks -- *woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord; in days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains . . . all nations shall stream to it; the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom . . .*

The glory of the kingdom of David and Solomon is destroyed by Babylon and Assyria, and the people of Israel become exiles in a foreign land, just as the holy family did centuries later. Then they return to their land.

The pattern of darkness and light is part of being human. When we see God as he is, and acknowledge him as Lord, light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

So, why **do** bad things happen to good people? Why do people die in war, in car accidents, in bushfires, from heart attacks or brain tumours or cancer? How could the Nazis get away with the Holocaust?

Well, if we turn to Google for answers, as we all seem to do these days, we find a multitude of ideas, conflicting ideas from many religious traditions, and from humanist philosophy. Youtube has more than 60 clips, in which priests and pastors and rabbis and gurus and humanists all struggle to answer the question. *Why do bad things happen to good people?*

One minister says bluntly

They don't -- there are no good people. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom.3.23)

Another responds by saying we are asking the wrong question

Instead, we might ask why God would preserve so many, since we all deserve death. There is a great war going on between good and evil and God has temporarily permitted to allow sin to show itself.

A popular response is that bad things happen to good people **because** of human sin. We can follow the logic:

The reason there is evil in the world is because the Lord allows us to choose. And the reason He allows us to choose is because He made us in His image. And He made us in His image so that we could have perfect freedom, and indescribable happiness. . . . Herod also had the gift of free will, as all men do. He chose to use this gift in an evil way.

Another popular response is that only sends the biggest trials to those who are able to bear them.

Israel Folau tells us that the current deadly bushfires are God's punishment for Australia's legalising abortion and same-sex marriage.

Barnaby Joyce says that the bushfire victims had probably voted for the Greens, as if that makes their deaths acceptable.

We may reject some of these answers but still not know why bad things happen to good people. Why was Herod allowed to make God's Son a refugee? Why was he allowed to get away with murdering little children? Why are people losing their homes and their lives to bushfires today? Why are innocent children being killed by air strikes in Yemen and in Syria?

The answer is not in logic, but in faith, in having complete trust and confidence in God and God's dealings with us, as the Scriptures express it, *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* (Heb. 11.1)

The answer is probably beyond human understanding, because it relates to the nature and being of God. But we can draw hope from despair when we explore the Biblical record of God's dealing with humankind -- when we see God as God-with-us, not as some super Mr Fixit who is on hand to deal with all our problems.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer looked for God as the Nazis took over Germany and found God with him in his prison cell, supporting him in his suffering. He saw that, in his words, *God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which God can be with us and help us.*

Christ entered the world as a weak and powerless baby, and died as a criminal. But that was not the end of the story. Once again, darkness gave way to light, as it has done since the first day of creation.

So whatever the answer to the question, *Why does God allow human suffering?* it cannot be that God does not care. We know that he cared so much that he sent his only son into the world to share the human experience of darkness and light and to free us from our mortality.

This is the heart of the Christmas story. This is the message we are committed to sharing with others at all times and especially in this coming year of mission, that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

Thanks be to God.