

## The First Sunday of Christmas 2019 (Year A)

I don't know about you, but it strikes me that there is something disquieting about our Gospel reading today. We bypass Matthew's account of the visit of the Magi to the Holy Family and are instead pitched into a very different part of the birth narrative of Jesus, where human darkness replaces the star of Bethlehem. We are disorientated - we want to bask in the light of the Nativity because we are still very much in Christmas mode. Next week, after all, we *will* celebrate the Epiphany, so why does the lectionary jump around as it has today?

In fact, I think that this is a healthy call to us not to merely allow ourselves to wallow in 'star-light and fire-glow,' as a carol has it, but to recognise that the birth of Jesus is absolutely rooted within the realities of everyday life. There is nothing wrong with loving the celebration of Christmas with all those different traditions we know and love. However, there is a balance to be had. As we welcome the child who will change our understanding of the relationship we have with God, we are also called to know the way in which we ourselves are called to challenge the world through the call of Jesus within our own lives.

Perhaps the most evident lesson from all of our readings today is the way in which God, the creator of all, the one beyond all telling and understanding is the God who desires to make the divine presence known to each of us through intimacy and closeness. Isaiah speaks of this when he points out that, *'It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity, he redeemed them.'* This beautiful image is, of course, a shadow of what is to come, because in the birth of Jesus, God offers the way in which this intimacy and closeness of divine love is open to all people.

The Gospel account today represents the way in which the vulnerabilities of our humanity are taken to the heart of God, who in the face of Jesus reveals the *desire* for relationship at the deepest level borne for each of us. It is also a call to follow in the Way, the Truth and the very Life of Jesus – participating in the divine love story and revealing this in the realities of everyday living. In this we are bridges of God's love within our humanity. Yet we remember, as we see the account of Jesus's own life unfold, that this is no easy path. Openness, vulnerability and fragility lie at the heart of the Way. Ultimately, Jesus reveals this fulness of life through self-giving love and death on a cross in the cruellest of circumstances. Thus we are led to Resurrection life ourselves - participators in the life of God here and now.

The contrast within today's Gospel between Joseph and Herod represent the choices we all have. Matthew represents the reality of life - there is nothing sentimental or trivial. There has been much speculation about the veracity of the account of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. Can it be true? We certainly know that Herod was a despot. He made the most of what power he had at the hands of the Romans.

What is absolutely true is that the darkness of which humanity is capable revealed in Herod's actions, which seek to destroy hope and sometimes even life itself. It has been present throughout human history and is as present and active in the world today as it ever was. In this, we may find him active when we hear national or international news or

situations within our own knowledge. *'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children.'* We can all understand Matthew's quote from Jeremiah when terrible deeds are wrought on the innocent and defenceless.

Sometimes what Herod represents will be present within our own relationships and even our own families. Indeed, he is capable of being present in our own actions, words or choices. If we ignore or fail to help the marginalised, if we lock ourselves into prisons of self-opinion or self-serving bigotry, the Herod in us is at work. Within the world he may be nameless, yet we will all be capable of recognising the darkness represented in this account.

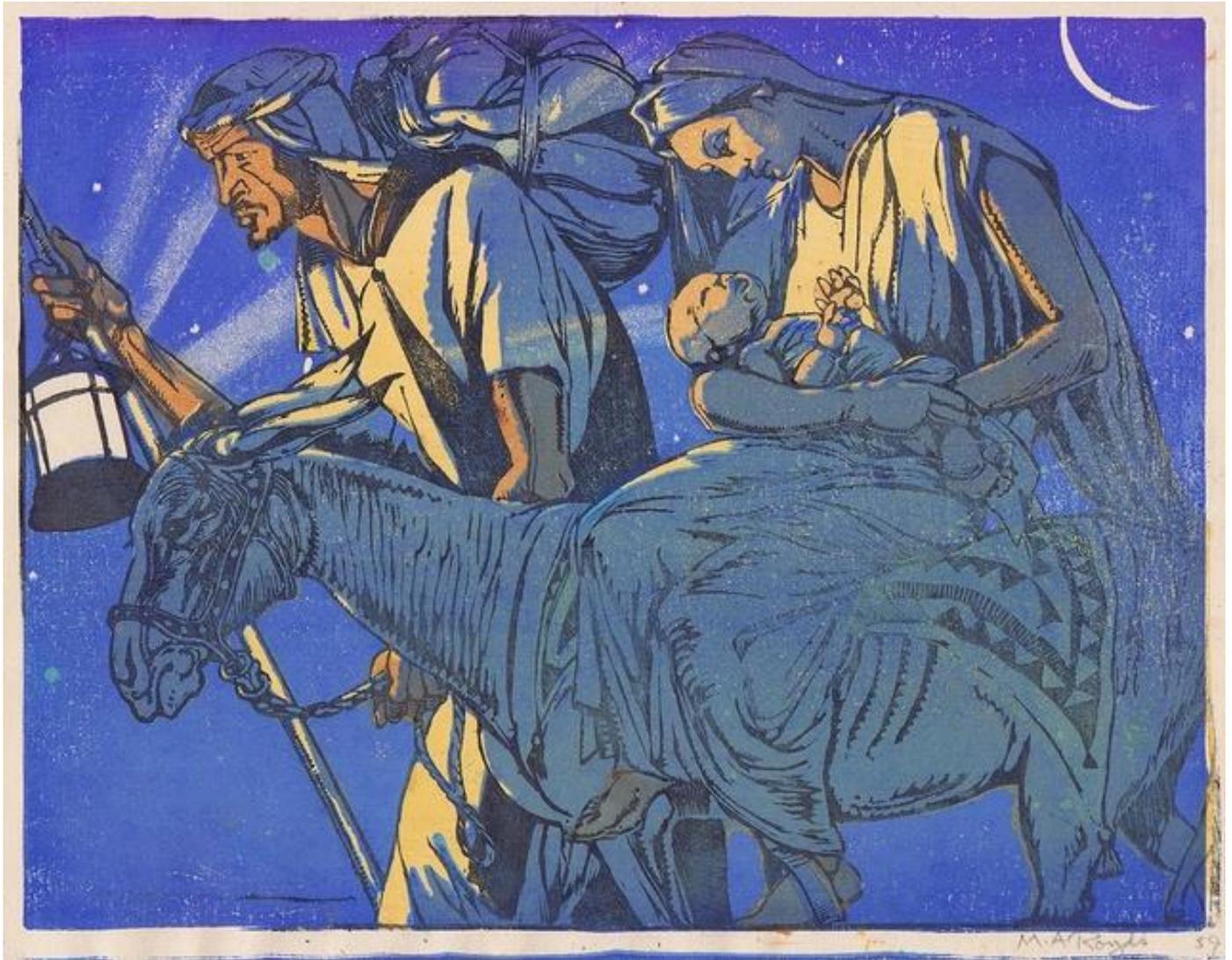
There is another way. Matthew gives us the fullest of the Gospel accounts of Joseph. Even this is brief, yet nevertheless we can identify with Joseph's vulnerabilities and doubts because they are the same as we ourselves experience. Joseph allows himself to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit within his life and this trust in God brings peace and security to his family. In this he guards the divine light of his son, a light which has already overflowed into the life of Mary through which she himself is transformed.

Joseph's call is our own: to trust in the offer of God to participate in the Divine Life and allow this to overflow into our relationships with each other and indeed all we meet. We are called to welcome Jesus into the home of our hearts, living lives of prayer and loving and serving people to the best of our ability. In doing so, we move on to Epiphany in real time – the action of revealing Christ to the world. This is not airy-fairy religion. It is living a flesh-and-blood faith in the knowledge of the one who brings heaven to earth and, paradoxically, earth to heaven. This is our call to the **fulness** of life, no matter what events overtake us: the knowledge of God's love for each one of us, inviolable and unshakeable - made known to us in the face of a baby whom Joseph loved as his own.

In a backward glance to Bethlehem, some beautiful words of St John Chrysostom:

What more could I say of this mystery? I see a carpenter and a manger, an infant in swaddling clothes, a virgin giving birth without the necessities of life; nothing but poverty and complete destitution. Have you ever seen wealth in such great penury? How could he who was rich have become, for our sake, so poor that he had neither bed nor bedding but was laid in a manger? O immeasurable wealth concealed in poverty! He lies in a manger, yet he rocks the whole world. He is bound in swaddling bands, yet he breaks the bonds of sin. Before he could speak he taught the wise men and converted them. What else can I say? Here is the new-born babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. With him are Mary, virgin and mother, and Joseph who was called his father.

Since therefore all rejoice, I too desire to rejoice; to share the choral dance, to celebrate the festival. But I take my part holding in my arms the cradle of Christ. For this is all my hope, this my life, this my salvation. And I too, with the angels, sing: Glory to God in the Highest; and with the shepherds: and on earth peace to all people of good will.



*The Flight to Egypt – Mabel Royds (1874-1941) National Galleries of Scotland*

### **Isaiah 63:7-9**

<sup>7</sup> I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,  
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,  
because of all that the Lord has done for us,  
and the great favour to the house of Israel  
that he has shown them according to his mercy,  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

<sup>8</sup> For he said, 'Surely they are my people,  
children who will not deal falsely';

and he became their saviour

<sup>9</sup> in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel

but his presence that saved them;

in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;

he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

### **Hebrews 2:10-18**

<sup>10</sup> It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. <sup>11</sup> For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, <sup>12</sup> saying,

'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.'

<sup>13</sup> And again,  
'I will put my trust in him.'

And again,

'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.'

<sup>14</sup> Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. <sup>16</sup> For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. <sup>17</sup> Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup> Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

### **Matthew 2:13-23**

<sup>13</sup> Now after they [the Magi] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

<sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> 'A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,

Rachel weeping for her children;

she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

<sup>19</sup> When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup> 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' <sup>21</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'