**Matthew 2:13-23**

**The other side of Christmas**

In the weeks leading up to Christmas Day, we have beautiful stories from the Bible to think about: angels, shepherds, a star above a manger, donkeys and the Nativity scene. It seems like such a peaceful scene, even if we know that, in reality, it was complex and difficult and painful for Mary and Joseph. But in the run-up to Christmas, we focus on the glory and the wonder.

But now we are on the other side of Christmas and, within a week of the lovely celebrations, things in Scripture have already got ugly and dark.

The reading that we’ve just heard from Matthew 2 is the other side of Christmas and it falls into three sections: first, the call on the Holy Family to go to Egypt, second, what happens back home while they are in Egypt, and third, their return to Israel.

And because we are in the Christmas season it’s tempting to focus on just the first one of these because Jesus and his parents are the focus of the narrative. And this part of the life of Jesus is important, of course, and especially for Matthew who is the only Gospel writer to record it. Because in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the New Moses; the giver of the Sermon on the Mount like Moses brought the Commandments down from the Mountain; the liberator of the people of Israel like Moses liberated them by crossing the Red Sea. So it suits the purpose of Matthew to have Jesus go into Egypt so that, like Moses, he can come out of Egypt to free his people.

And as we focus on this aspect of the life of Jesus, we are reminded that Jesus himself was a refugee and that he understands the plight of refugees in our own time and he has compassion on them. Jesus himself was a refugee, displaced from his homeland by politics, war and poverty and we need to remember that this is integral to the story of the God whom we worship and remember our own responsibility towards the refugees in our midst. So the flight of Jesus into Egypt is a very important part of the story that happens the other side of Christmas.

But on this other side of Christmas, we are thrown immediately into a quite horrific and cruel scene, verse 16: “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.” What an unspeakable evil this is, to execute the innocent children in the village in the hope of ridding the world of the Messiah.

I have been privileged enough to visit the tomb of the massacred children in Bethlehem. And when I go there, I was surprised to see how few they were: probably 10 to 15 in number. What was I expecting? Maybe hundreds of little tombs. But actually, the small number of these tiny tombs brought home the power of the story for me. A little Middle Eastern village, invaded by soldiers, taking all the children together and killing them in front of their mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and grandparents. The barbarity of that act in that close knit community where everyone would have known everyone else was cruel in extremity.

And, my goodness, how many parts of the world today experience the same barbarity and cruelty? Children brutally murdered by invading soldiers in the village. Human slave traders taking the innocent children and trafficking them for sex. Landmines being disguised as toys so that the children pick them up and are either maimed or killed as a result of their naïve curiosity and playfulness. How much barbarism and cruelty is still meted out on the children today in the name of politics or power or religion or might or empire.

And the third scene from this story is the return of the Holy Family to Israel. But again, this is a journey fraught with danger and fear because Archelaus has now succeeded Herod to the throne and he is a wicked leader and so the Family have to go to Nazareth instead.

This is the other side of Christmas, the other side of the angels and shepherds. Just as we celebrated joy and wonder in the lead up to Christmas, so we contemplate vulnerability and chaos and danger and frailty on this side of Christmas.

On the one side we have joy and confidence.

On the other side we have vulnerability and fear.

And standing in the middle of the two is the birth of the Messiah, our Saviour.

And what a wonderful metaphor that is for life. On one hand, we experience joys and wonders and amazements and peace. But on the other hand, we experience pain and suffering and loss and vulnerability.

How can we possibly make sense of the see-saw of emotions that life brings?

Well, we can only make sense of it if we put Jesus Christ, our Saviour, in the centre and allow the see-saw of life’s experience to pivot around him as the source of our Being.

If Jesus is at the centre of our lives, we can make sense of our joys and wonder and peace.

If Jesus is at the centre of our lives, we can make sense of our vulnerabilities and fear and frailties.

Take Jesus out of the centre of our lives and we are just left with a see-saw of emotions and experience and we are tossed around like a little boat on the stormy waves of the sea.

But if Jesus is at the centre, if Jesus is our pivot, if Jesus is our anchor, then we will have something, someone, to hold onto in the ups and downs of life.

So this year, we want to celebrate Christmas and we want it to be meaningful for us today and not just a nice story from history. But if we just stay with the angels and the shepherds and the awe and wonder, we have a very lop-sided Christmas indeed that may not speak as powerfully into our lives as we might hope. Ironically, we need the other side of Christmas. We need the ugliness of the story so that we can realize the totality of humanity and human experience that the Christmas story embraces.

There is awe and wonder in life.

There is loss and fear and vulnerability in life.

And in the midst of all this stands Jesus Christ, God’s Son, our Saviour.

And this Christmas, we embrace the whole story in the sure and confident knowledge that Jesus embrace us in our totality: all that is good and wonderful, all that is fearful, frail and vulnerable.

Jesus Christ stands in the very centre of our lives, in good times and in bad.

And that is the wonderful message of Christmas.