

## **Sermon 29 December 2019**

### **Isaiah 63:7-9 and Matthew 2:13-end**

There are times, and this is one of them, when after reading the passages set for the day in the lectionary, I just want to bury my head in my hands and weep.

Life in Biblical times was brutal. Life today is often brutal. If we are not the victims of brutality ourselves, we witness its outcome. Why is there a need for foodbanks? With baskets waiting for our donations at the doors of supermarkets, or the trolley we have which supports the work of the Sisters of the Church? Why do people become refugees, leaving everything they have, everything they know as familiar, and cast themselves on the uncertain generosity of strangers in a strange land?

This Christmas morning, after the beautiful stories told and retold, through nativity and carol service, through the crib services with added donkey, I was driving back from a night spent on Christmas Eve with my sister's family in Bath. Radio 4 was broadcasting a 30 minute reflection on the Coventry Carol. I have heard it many a time, but having never sung it, have not really taken in the words.

[Listen to part of it.]

It starts quietly, reverentially: 'lullay, lullay, thou little tiny child' and then builds in a loud, shout of anger and despair: 'Herod the King, in his raging, charged he hath this day, his men of might, in his own sight, all young children to slay'.

A song, written for a mystery play, to be sung by women grieving the loss of their cruelly slaughtered children. Which mirrors Matthew's gospel as he recalls the women of Israel singing in exile in Babylon.

The reflection, part of Soul Music, which you will still be able to hear on BBC Sounds, recalls among other stories how the carol was part of healing after the bombing of Coventry Cathedral; how the mystery play re-enacts the slaughter and a visceral response to it; how one woman has found it has a healing power as she writes her Christmas cards and contemplates her address book and the names of family and friends who have either died or with whom she has lost touch and then how one woman found it profoundly helped her following the loss of a child. Listen to it if you can.

But, how can this story be a part of the healing of nations? How can it be part of our Christmas story?

Matthew points back to Exodus. Let us remember that Pharaoh ordered the killing of all the Israelite boys. And remember the bravery of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who disobeyed those orders and in so doing saved the life of Moses.

Matthew is suggesting to us, that we might see Jesus, not just as the Son of David, the son of Abraham, but also as another Moses – a liberator – come to teach us that God is salvation.

Jesus is born with a price on his head, born in the shadow of the cross. Born in the time of a king, who as his power increased, so did his paranoia. But every time, has had, still has, rulers like this.

The world Jesus came into, is still a world like ours. For it is a world that we have made.

And the world is a dangerous place for those who are most vulnerable, they suffer when the most powerful are irresponsible.

I've also been deeply moved this season at the various stories on the BBC news pages, about how schools in poor areas are providing mental health care to both pupils and parents; how costumes for plays are shared; how food is shared; how children are fed. How those who are vulnerable in our society care for one another. And yet we know the deep injustices that are done to them, by those who want to hold onto power and look after their own self interest.

God's promises and human resistance act as a constant irritation to those in power. God works by filling out the world from within. Everything is soaked through with divine energy, love and light. Even at times when the darkness seems to want to overcome everything.

God values our humanity beyond anything, beyond all imagining.

That begs the question, how do we value human lives? Are we, in a lesser way, with less power, some sort of Herod? Or are we like the shepherds and the magi, both worshipping Jesus and giving him the gift of our lives? Do we seek to protect and build up the vulnerable? Or do we seek to protect what little power we have?

As Isaiah recalls God redeeming us, through his love and pity, lifting us up and carrying us, maybe there are people we can carry? Maybe we have reached a stage of life where we need to be carried ourselves. We can still yet remember those more vulnerable than ourselves, carry their sorrow in our hearts and pray for them to experience light, energy and love.

**Sarah Thomas 29 December 2019**