

# ‘Born in us today’

## Advent resources from the 2019 URC educational visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories



Pilgrims from the educational visit at Beit Sahour, where the angels spoke Good News to the shepherds

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## INTRODUCTION

In September 2019, 21 members of the United Reformed Church (URC) accompanied Derek Estill, Moderator of the URC General Assembly, on a visit to the Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories (IOPT). It was not a tour or a holiday for any of us, but for all of us it was an immersive pilgrimage as we spent much of our time immersed in the lives of people who are among the world's most maligned, treated as strangers in their own land.

**In these materials for Advent, we seek to use the experiences we gained during our visit, literally *Walking the Way of Jesus*, to read the Bible in a new light, particularly the Old Testament book of Isaiah and the Gospel according to Matthew, to enable those who are leading worship, Bible study or theological reflection during Advent, to explore and share some of these insights.**

The four sections of these materials cover *Hope, Justice, Power* and *Equality*, which can be looked at over the four weeks of Advent. Each section opens with notes about the Old Testament and Gospel Readings before sharing a brief story or experience from our visit, followed by some prayer and hymn suggestions for organising worship around the theme.

The notes are quite detailed and extensive to give as much insight as possible, especially into the Gospel readings, which we feel must be read in a particularly new light, given our experiences on the visit. Please feel free to use what is useful for engaging people in your context.

We are grateful to the contributors of these resources for such thought-provoking reflections and 'worship poetry', and to Simon Peters, [Walking the Way](#) Project Manager, for supporting this series.

Any feedback you may have on this series is most welcome. Please e-mail [wtw@urc.org.uk](mailto:wtw@urc.org.uk) with your thoughts.

Our visit enabled us to witness the effects of modern-day power imbalances. People whose families have lived in the land for millennia have found themselves restricted to ever diminishing areas, hemmed in by walls and fences. Water supplies are controlled, livelihoods have been destroyed by the restriction of movement and loss of land, and harassment is a daily reality for many.

The Israeli state longs for safety and security, but this has been at the cost of peace, harmony and diversity for great swathes of the population.

Our travel agents told us that out of all the people who visit the Holy Land, one percent come to genuinely hear the stories of those who suffer the most in what is supposed to be the holiest of places. Indeed, we were told by Angela Godfrey-Goldstein of Jahalin Solidarity, a Palestinian non-profit organisation, "It's not about who is right. It's about who is suffering."

May the gift of Jesus infuse our experience of worship with joy in this sacred season.

Photos from the educational visit can be found [here](#). Please [contact us](#) if you would like to use or share them.

## **Introduction to Old Testament readings**

The Advent lectionary readings provide wonderful images of the kingdom of God as it should be, full of peace and unity. Many of the images are immediately familiar: 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares', 'the wolf shall live with the lamb', 'they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy Mountain'. It sounds ideal.

The book of Isaiah is not idealistic though. For the eighth century prophet, whose voice we find in the first section of Isaiah, these images were a vision of a future that would be a marked contrast from a turbulent present. The passages surrounding our readings chart a land suffering under the threat of the expanding Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian kingdoms of the prophet's time were not simply looking to plunder Judah's resources, but to claim lands and to rule them; the people of those lands found themselves the victims of empire. Even if you delve into text-critical studies and date parts of proto-Isaiah to a later period, the story was the same. If it wasn't the Assyrians that were fighting for control of Judah, it was the Babylonians. If it wasn't the Babylonians, it was the Persians. Empires defined this part of the world for centuries that stretched into millennia.

Isaiah the prophet is said to have advised the eighth century kings Ahaz and Hezekiah during their reigns and to have advocated anti-Assyrian policies. Judah was a tiny country in the ancient Levant that was at risk of being swallowed up by the might of the Assyrian Empire (and indeed the northern kingdom of Israel did fall to the Assyrians in 722 BC). In a world of political turmoil, threat and injustice, it is hardly surprising that people placed their hopes in a God that was frequently characterised by wrath and anger, ready to judge and destroy the wicked. Despite this, images of peace are peppered throughout Isaiah 1:39. These are not predictions of a time when the Assyrians might be defeated; they are visions of a world where God, not Empire, is the focus.

Isaiah reminds us that empires have ruled throughout history and that then, as now, the weak are oppressed by the powerful. Isaiah's visions of peace are not brought about by conquest or control. These visions are theological. Peace comes when God's justice is made more important than human power. Peace comes when humans recognise that they are equal under God and when we actively seek it rather than just waiting for an end to conflict. Building walls and arming soldiers cannot make Isaiah's visions a reality. Our weapons must be surrendered and irrevocably transformed into tools for growth. The love of power must be sacrificed in order to accept God's power.

Advent is a time of preparation, not just of waiting. Isaiah's visions teach us that peace is not an ideal but is a real possibility if we can change our models of thinking. Peace is active, prepare for it. Act with hope, maybe then the waiting will be over.

## **Introduction to Gospel readings**

Whether we are thinking, in the run-up to Christmas, about the story of Jesus' ministry among the desperate peasant-farmers and indentured slaves that made up the populace of the Galilee under Roman Occupation, the situation in IOPT right now, or the fact that our planetary home is under terminal threat from climate change, violence and massive inequality, we need to ask why the world is in the state it's in.

One answer is because we have failed to take Christmas seriously, at least since 313 CE. This is particularly true of Matthew's Christmas.

The two Christmas stories we read in the Gospels, from Matthew and Luke, are the announcement that God has come among us, in Jesus, to change the world from the ground up. It is nothing short of God's declaration of war on the world order of empire: the dramatic inversion of the world in which the 'first shall be last and the last shall be first'. This is what Jesus calls, 'the kingdom of God'.

How would those listening to him have understood that? Firstly, they'd have heard it as citizens of the Roman Empire. Imagine the world with God as king, instead of the Roman Emperor! Imagine a world in which God makes the rules!

Secondly, they'd have heard it as people living under Roman occupation, as the victims of empire, not its beneficiaries. That is how the people of Israel had lived for centuries, under occupation by what seemed like an endless succession of regional powers. As they turned to their scriptures, they would have heard the prophets speak in God's name, promising God's justice and liberation from slavery. Life under God's rules was the promise of 'heaven on earth' in place of their daily experience of life as hell on earth. That is why they would have echoed Jesus' prayer with passionate, urgent longing: "Lord, may your Kingdom come! May your will be done here, on earth, as it is presently done in heaven."

The biggest, most urgent theological questions for Jesus' audience were: "When will God get rid of the Romans? How long do we have to wait? Don't you care about our suffering, God? Aren't we important to you? How many more of us have to die, or lose everything we have? You destroyed Pharaoh's slave system in Moses' time: Are you powerful enough to take on the Emperor? When will you send us another Moses to lead us to freedom again?"

The answer given by the rabbis and religious authorities was: "When God sends the Messiah to bring God's kingdom!" Small wonder, then, that Jesus electrified his hearers at the outset of his ministry in Galilee, with his announcement, 'The waiting time is over! The kingdom of God is already here among you! This is Good News that you can trust with your very lives – so start living in a completely new way!' (Mark 1:15, my paraphrase).

No wonder Jesus and his message were such Good News to the poor and marginalized! No wonder he was recognised as a threat to the status quo so serious that he needed to be neutralized! If the Kingdom was coming, if the world was changing from the ground up, and on behalf of the very least first, it meant the end of empire's gravy train for the rich, the powerful and the collaborators who were thriving at the expense of their vulnerable fellow Jewish peasants.

That was the irony of the occupation: the Galilean peasants suffered not only at the hands of the Romans, but also at the hands of Jerusalem's elite, who collaborated with the Romans in exchange for financial and political advantage. Significantly, those included Herod (Rome's client king), his court, the high priest (who was appointed by Rome) and temple authorities. It also included the tax collectors – hated turncoats who collected the tax levied on the populace by Rome to fund the Occupation. People like Matthew himself.

Here's the really important point to remember: ever since 313 CE, when the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church has been on the wrong side of the power and wealth divide. From being a peaceful revolutionary movement that proclaimed the overthrow of Rome in the name of God, and prayed for that daily, it became the Church of empire and the 'guardians of heaven'. Rome changed from being, in theological terms, 'the Whore of Babylon' to being hailed the Kingdom of God, and the Emperor was transformed from being seen as the 'antichrist' to being venerated as 'God's Messiah'!

Perhaps the most important implication of such a view is that, if Constantine was the Messiah, then salvation would no longer mean the transformation of this world on behalf of the poor, but the continuation of elite power, with the poor receiving their reward only in Heaven. In the eyes of empire, the poor needed to stop complaining about their circumstances in the here and now, and instead be good, loyal citizens of the Empire, awaiting 'pie in the sky when they died', or when the Messiah returned again!

Do you see how this transforms the whole meaning of Advent? Advent is 'waiting time'. It is about waiting impatiently for God to come and transform this world into a place of justice and peace for the very neediest first. After 313, it became waiting for death, or for Jesus to come again and whisk us all off to heaven. Instead of being part of Jesus' mission to transform the world into the kingdom of God, it became about accepting the world the way it is and looking forward to a future with God in heaven.

The story Matthew tells is the opposite of this imperial Christmas. You won't find a traditional nativity play, with its usual tableau of kings, shepherds and angels worshipping at the stable manger in this book. Such an approach leaves the world untouched, with its norms of injustice, oppression and misery for the very least intact and even God-blessed!

Instead, Matthew takes us into the darkness of peasant life in Bethlehem, with the population ground down by Roman political and military might, threatened by a paranoid royal collaborator. His Christmas has no shepherds and angels with 'glad tidings of great joy'. Instead, he invokes the story of the Israelite slaves groaning under Pharaoh's system and the attempts to curb their numbers by slaughtering any Hebrew males that are born. He tells us that the baby born to Mary at Christmas is none other than a New Moses, the Messiah, God with us!

Christmas will do its transforming work in us when we learn to wait with the poor, the oppressed, the dispossessed and the helpless, and to share their urgent prayers for God's Kingdom of justice, peace and joy. It will transform us as we learn that it is God who waits for us to embrace the cause and mission of the kingdom. It will empower us to put all we have and are at God's disposal and to become, as churches, signs and examples of God's kingdom.

## Week One: Hope

*"It's tempting to hope...I always tell people when you look at life, make sure it's glass half full."*

Eid, Bedouin community of Al Khan al Amar

### Old Testament Reading

*Isaiah 2:1-4: A Vision of Hope*

Isaiah 2 sets itself up with a bold heading: "The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." Isaiah 2:1-4:6 is a self-contained unit, which R.E. Clements argued acted as a prologue to the rest of Isaiah. It parallels Micah 4:1-3, but in the context of Isaiah, it introduces the vision of a future Jerusalem where YHWH (God) will rule with justice and peace.

'In the days to come...' – a prophetic formula that looks forward to a future time. This isn't talking about the coming of heaven in the distant future (an eschatological vision), but rather a hope of a time which the people will see themselves, as YHWH's reign of peace and justice takes hold. Isaiah 2:2-4 provides an image of hope after the judgement and destruction that is described in Isaiah 1.

So, Isaiah 2:2-4 introduces hope after the judgement and destruction of Isaiah 1. This hope is centred around the city of Jerusalem. There are numerous images of Jerusalem in this passage that draw on other biblical traditions: Jerusalem is the highest mountain, the mountain at the centre of the world, the site of the temple, the place from which instruction (tora) goes out... This is the dwelling place of God and the centre of the universe. It is a place where God judges and rules, not human empires. It is an alternative to the world of war and destruction of the eighth century.

Jerusalem is described as being the place of 'the house of the God of Jacob' (i.e. the temple and the dwelling place of YHWH), but it is not reserved for the descendants of Jacob. Instead, we see the beginnings of a universalism that becomes more prevalent in the second part of the book, produced later than the first part (Deutero-Isaiah): 'all nations shall stream to it.' The expected order is being turned upside down; the term *nhr* (נהר), 'to flow', is usually used to describe water flowing downstream. The unusual use of the verb in this context describes the people streaming uphill to the temple. The norm does not apply in this vision of Jerusalem. It is a place of pilgrimage for all people to come and experience God.

### Gospel Reading

*Matthew 1:1-18: Jesus and the God of the Little People*

Matthew describes his genealogy as a 'biblos geneseōs' (literally, a 'Book of Origins'). In other words, this is a new Genesis, a new account of God's creation. Strengthened by verse 16, where Jesus is born (genesis) of Mary, his father is God and he is born through the Holy Spirit, as we will learn (Matthew 1:20).

What is this 'new Creation'? It is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew, as a faithful Jew, does not refer to it as 'the kingdom of God'). This is a renewed earth, the world as God intended at creation, a world where 'God's will is done as perfectly on earth as it is in heaven', as Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

A genealogy should function to establish legitimacy – in this case, the royal tradition going back to David. However, here we see a conflict between the interpretation of the Law (the Purity System upheld by the Temple) and the debt system (upheld by the Galilean peasantry). The former is based on strict class boundaries, while the latter involves mutual covenant care for one another and redistributive justice (much like Jesus' call for the 'first shall be last.') Here we see the prophetic vision of God at loggerheads

with the royal (Davidic) tradition, which is focused on temple and palace, centred in Jerusalem. Jesus himself forms his very character and ministry through this radical interpretation of the covenant.

Matthew's fundamental point is that the royal tradition is bankrupt. It cannot deliver the kingdom because it colludes with Rome. It is an interpretation of the Law that kills compassion, blesses exploitation and pits love of God against love of neighbour. It casts the poor and the marginalised, the focus of God's new creation, as 'sinners' – enemies of God.

The kings chosen by Matthew conspicuously betray their messianic role of embodying God's justice, and their failure to embed and embody the Mosaic Law in Israel's national life. The exception that proves the rule is Josiah. He is a good king because he rediscovers the law of God contained in the deuteronomic code. Yet after the exile, the code ends up becoming a way of legitimising the connection between God's Law and the Temple/Palace in Jerusalem. The ways of the monarchy (i.e. of Empire) are soon re-established. The purification intended by God through the exile does not take place. It does not bring about the Kingdom of God.

Matthew is telling us a story of Jesus, who embodies the Kingdom as well as proclaiming it, that is linked to the salvation history of Israel (Abraham to David, David to the Exile, the Return until Jesus). Time and again he will link the story of Jesus to the fulfilment of prophecy (e.g. 'This happened in order to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet'). However, we must not mistake this for an unbroken continuity. Jesus is a point of rupture in the story, because the old story has become a story of the failure of the kings to establish God's covenantal justice. Far from being Good News for the poor and marginalised, it has become very bad news indeed. God is starting something, through Jesus, that is to deliver the kingdom of God for the 'little people', to transform creation by tearing up the way we make our world work (i.e. the order of empire) from the roots up.

#### *Experience on the ground*

It is important to be responsible pilgrims when we visit the Holy Land today. It is wonderful to be able to walk the Via Dolorosa, to sail on the Sea of Galilee and wander around numerous churches. However, 99% of pilgrimage groups only see Palestine when they go to the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem, and even then, it is often only a brief visit that avoids going anywhere else in the town. It is important to be responsible pilgrims when we visit holy places and to not avoid the realities of what is happening around us. Simply by spending a day rather than an hour in Bethlehem and talking to shopkeepers can be a way of engaging with people during a pilgrimage.

There are agricultural restrictions throughout the West Bank. Dairy, meat and agricultural products are not allowed to be taken through the checkpoints out of the West Bank, which means that farmers are not able to sell their goods in markets on the other side of the separation barrier. This also prevents them from selling in Jerusalem. Agricultural livelihoods are at risk because of these restrictions. Many olive farmers have also been cut off from their fields and groves by the separation barrier. To get to them, they have to apply for a permit and then have the gates to their own fields unlocked for them by Israeli soldiers. The olives often rot on the trees since the farmers cannot access the fields to harvest them and the uncut grass poses a fire risk.

It is not enough to simply end the fighting. Active peace is necessary. We must not close our eyes to what is happening around us. When God is placed at the centre, the power of empires becomes insignificant and all of creation can prosper.

## Worship Resources

### *Call to Worship*

God of strength, of the kings and the prophets  
God of hope, of the poor and the outcast  
God of surprises, of saviours in stables

**God of us all, we worship you**  
**God of us all, we worship you**  
**God of us all, we worship you**

### *Prayer of Approach*

We come here today, just as we are  
With the weeks we've each had and the month that awaits us  
    Some of us feeling full of joy and anticipation, bringing our hope and excitement  
    Some of us feeling full of pain and frustration, bringing our passion and anger  
    Some of us feeling full of tiredness and grief, bringing our loss and our fears  
    And some of us feeling empty, bringing nothing but our open hands and broken hearts  
We bring ourselves to this place and to each other  
Seeking to sing and to share and rejoice  
Seeking to be still and to rest and receive  
Seeking to be challenged, provoked and spurred on  
Seeking to be comforted, enfolded and loved  
Seeking together to share our journeys and to travel this next step together      **Amen**

### *Confession*

We confess that we have not always followed the ways of our God  
    That we have turned to the ways of insecurity, selfishness and greed  
    That we have remained silent in the face of injustice  
We confess that we have not always prayed for the strength to engage  
    That we have rested in our comfort  
    That we have blinkered our eyes to see only our own cares and concerns  
We confess that we have not always trusted that our God is good  
    That we have relied on our own strength  
    That we have taken action without praying first  
Loving God,  
**Hear our regret, and help us to walk in your forgiveness**  
**Hear our weakness, and help us to walk in your strength**  
**Hear our doubt, and help us to walk in your faith**  
**Amen**

### *Offertory Prayer*

Loving God,  
We thank you for hope, personified in the gift of Jesus  
We thank you for the opportunity to play our part in making your kingdom come  
Take this offering and do what only you can  
Inspiring us to take hold of your gifts and do what only we can  
And may we surprise each other  
**Amen**

### *Hymn: The Olive Tree Against the Sky*

1. The olive tree against the sky  
strong and healthy as time goes by.  
The olive tree means life and health

to those who tend and till the earth.  
They connect us to ages gone,  
and keep watch over ages to come.

2. The hands that tend see more than we,  
they know the stories of every tree.  
The harvests grown, the storms that wrack,  
are there in every twist and crack.  
We see a wilderness spotted with trees,  
they see all times connected by these.

3. Commitment shows in planting a tree,  
to trust a future that's yet to be.  
Roots that spread to gather rain,  
leaves them open to harm and pain.  
Yet in that trust are promises true,  
God is with us, and all is new.

4. So in this season let us be light,  
and shine a love that is so bright.  
We celebrate the birth of a man,  
light of hope since the world began.  
Hold the branch of an olive tree,  
and live the peace we're called to be.

Words: © David Coaker 2019 (Altd)

Tune: Sussex Carol LM Irregular (We recommend singing this through beforehand)

### *Benediction*

As we leave this place

Let us go into the world

With a renewed sense of hope

Hope in what God can do in us

Hope in what God can do through us

Hope in what God can do despite us

Hope for a world where God's kingdom is established in every corner and in every heart

Let us go into the world and let us walk in the light of the Lord

**Amen**

## Week Two: Justice

*"In my city, you have more rights than I do!"*

Issa Amro, human rights activist, our tour guide through Hebron

### Old Testament Reading

*Isaiah 11:1-9: A Vision of Justice*

Isaiah 11 begins with a description of an ideal ruler of the Davidic line, expressing hope that this dynasty will survive the Assyrian threat. The ruler will have wisdom, understanding, counsel and might, all characteristics that ensure successful policies and a stable rule. He shall also, however, 'delight... in the fear of the LORD.' The awe of God and submission to him is a prominent theme throughout the Hebrew Bible and here it focuses the attention on God, not the ruler. The ruler himself is never the subject of the verbs in Isaiah 11:1-9. YHWH (God) is the subject of the verbs as it is his spirit that 'shall rest on him' and shall bring all the characteristics of royal power. Whilst this section fits into the genre of the royal psalms, this focus on YHWH sets it apart from other passages. Human rule can work on earth, but only when it is focused on God.

An important characteristic of the divinely ordained king is that he is righteous and just, particularly in regard to the poor and the meek. The image of a justice kingdom is developed first in relation to the human world and then in relation to the animal kingdom, where predators and prey will be equal. Although some have argued that 11:1-5 and 6-9 are two separate poems that have been redacted together, the mirroring of the themes of justice draws the two sections together into one message. Human politics often affect the natural world and the concept of a 'return to Eden' or an apokatastasis (a restoration to an original state) often interweaves the relations of the human and the natural world.

Isaiah 11:6-9 is echoed in Isaiah 65:25 in a chapter that draws upon words from both Proto- (chapters 1-39) and Deutero- (chapters 40-55) Isaiah. Images of creation, restoration and justice abound in this poem of hope. The themes of Isaiah 11 and other parts of the Hebrew Bible were re-appropriated for the post-exilic audience as they strived to forge an identity after the turmoil of exile and the changes that Persian rule brought. Just as Isaiah 11:6-9 was made relevant for a later audience in Isaiah 65, so too can it be read in today's context. This is a living message of God's hope, justice and peace, present in today's world.

On earth there will always be human rulers, but with God as our focus we can create, and ensure, peace. This will benefit not only us, but all of creation. Isaiah's message of peace speaks throughout the ages.

### Gospel Reading

*Matthew 1: 18-25: 'Emmanuel – God is with us'!*

Note the stark differences between Matthew's and Luke's birth narratives:

- Mary and Joseph already live in Bethlehem and wind up in Nazareth after the flight into Egypt; there is no census or journey to Bethlehem.
- There are no shepherds and angels.

- Mary is completely passive and silent; there is no Annunciation or Magnificat. Indeed, Mary is never actually told what is happening to her, even by Joseph. Matthew presents her pregnancy while still a virgin as a mystery that is never solved for her within the confines of the story.
- By contrast with Luke, the angel converses only with Joseph on three occasions: the first time to reassure him that Mary has not been unfaithful; the second time to warn him to flee to Egypt; and the third time to tell him that it is safe to return. We might also assume that there is a fourth occasion, when Joseph is warned in a dream not to go back to Bethlehem.
- The visit of the Magi, the scenes from Herod's court and the slaughter of the Bethlehem boys are all unique to Matthew.

There is an ever-present sense of darkness and threat that hangs over Matthew's narrative. This is because Matthew emphasises the challenge to the 'principalities and powers' posed by the Kingdom in a different way to Luke. Jesus' birth is played out alongside the Herodian court, the chief priests and scribes, power brokers, rather than shepherds (as in Luke).

How are we to read the way in which Matthew portrays Mary and Joseph? On the simplest reading, the narrative reflects traditional patriarchal life: the primary actor in the story is male (Joseph); he speaks for Mary and acts to save the family. It is with Joseph that God communicates via the angel.

Is there something more going on, though? What if Matthew is presenting Joseph as a living example of the Purity System interpretation of the Law (which Jesus will counter-pose with the Covenantal mutual care interpretation)?

On this reading, Joseph is a compassionate man who does not wish to expose the faithless, pregnant Mary to the harshest possible treatment that would have been deemed appropriate under the Purity Laws. He therefore decides to terminate the engagement 'quietly', no easy matter within the goldfish bowl of village life. The point here is that the Purity System, which is based on avoiding the threat of contamination, is unable to recognise the presence and work of God's Spirit in this situation. For Joseph, it is inconceivable that God could approve of Mary's pregnancy, let alone be involved in it, any more than the upholders of the Purity System were able to conceive of Jesus the Law-breaker as God's Messiah. Yet that is precisely what is happening, in both cases.

On this reading, then, Matthew is setting up the conflict between Jesus' interpretation of the Law and the Temple/scribes and Pharisees' interpretation (the Purity System). Matthew will go on to present Jesus' distinctive interpretation through the Sermon on the Mount, which he takes care to frame as a 're-run' of Moses being given the Law by God on Mount Sinai. He presents Jesus as the New Moses, but one who *gives* the New Law of the Kingdom, rather than *receiving* it.

This makes sense, too, of Mary. The Purity System is patriarchal, regarding women as men's 'possessions' (e.g. the Tenth Commandment against coveting lists 'wife' among the male neighbour's other possessions, like a house, slave, ox or donkey).

Significantly, Matthew's subversive genealogy (which, as we have seen, undermines the legitimacy of the Royal Tradition) includes Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary, four women united both by their gender and their dodgy sexual histories. Those sexual histories are a direct result of the place of women in a patriarchal society. Matthew will also go on to emphasise that Mary Magdalene was a significant disciple of Jesus who, unlike Jesus' male disciples, followed Jesus faithfully to the cross (in the company of other women) and was a witness to the resurrection.

The genealogy emphasises that Jesus, 'God is with us', is outside the patriarchal system. He has no father; he is described as 'born of Mary'. In the Kingdom, women are no longer the possessions or sexual slaves of men; rather, they are as fully human as men. They are held up both historically and in Matthew's narrative terms as the faithful disciples who are prepared to Walk the Way of the Cross with Jesus and who are determined to honour him in death, which is how they come to be the first witnesses to the fact that Jesus has been raised.

'She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21). Matthew makes clear that Jesus is 'the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Matthew 1:1). His name means, 'God saves!' The meaning is clear: to be the Messiah is to be the Liberator, the One for whom everyone was waiting on God to send and end the Roman Occupation. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, who completed the Exodus from Egypt by overcoming Canaanite power and occupying the land. The name signals Jesus' mission of overcoming Rome, a mission that will be doomed by the refusal of the religious leaders to recognise the presence and promise of the Kingdom, and which will therefore end instead in crucifixion, the punishment reserved for failed revolutionaries.

As we shall see next week, that hard revolutionary edge is emphasised by Matthew's Christmas story, which pits Jesus against Herod.

Remember that Jesus was crucified under the charge of treason. The charge sign on the cross above his head will read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews' (27:37). The point is that only Rome can appoint a so-called 'king of the Jews'. They were Roman client kings, ruling only by express appointment and with the permission of Rome.

By charging Jesus with identifying himself as the 'King of the Jews', he was, in effect, being charged with claiming to be a royal messianic David-figure, leading a Jewish uprising against Rome.

That is understandable. Yet in Matthew 1:21, his messianic mission is defined as 'saving people from their sins', which sounds far more private and spiritual. How does saving people from their sins tie in with political/military liberation?

Jesus' contemporaries would have been able to answer that in a heartbeat. The burning national question was, 'When will God send the Messiah to free us from the Roman Occupation?' And the answer, given by the rabbis, was, 'When Israel keeps the Law perfectly!' The rabbinic teaching of the day looked back to the return from Babylonian Exile under Cyrus the Persian in 538 BC. Since then, though, Judah had been occupied by an unbroken succession of empires. The promised Davidic king, ruling from an independent Jerusalem, had never materialised.

The rabbis taught that Judah was still being punished by God for its sin (not keeping the whole Law fully). The Exile was not yet over. That is why they were still under occupation. It was the consequence of their sins. God would, however, send the Messiah to liberate them from Roman rule, establish an independent kingdom and rule as a Davidic king from Jerusalem. In other words, the Messiah would 'save the people from their sins', delivering them from the consequences of their sins (occupation). There was therefore no conflict or category change in moving from Messianic language to the language of 'saving the people from their sins'. Good News indeed for the poor. Terrifying for the powerful!

### *Experience on the ground*

There are environmental implications to the situation in Israel and Palestine. There is no rubbish collection in the Palestinian territories, and so waste has to be gathered by the side of the road and periodically

burnt. These dumps contain plastic bottles and spoiled meat. The rapid development of illegal settlements within the Palestinian Territories means that there are numerous slaughterhouses, plastic factories and shopping malls.

It is impossible to ask a Palestinian refugee what they are doing to reduce meat consumption or plastic usage or how they care for the starving street cats in Hebron. Environmental issues are barely even on the agenda when there is so much human suffering.

It is not just people who are suffering. All of God's creation is impacted by human conflict. In actively building peace, all of creation will benefit.

The separation barrier in Bethlehem is covered in graffiti of olive branches and doves, reminding us that God is still very much at work, through the people.

### **Worship Resources**

#### *Call to Worship (adapted from Psalm 72)*

God is with us!

He defends the cause of the righteous and He gives deliverance to the needy. He ends oppression and peace abounds. Let us rejoice that God is with us, as long as the sun endures and throughout the generations.

Jesus is born, and he is called Emmanuel. God is with us!

#### *Prayers of Approach and Confession*

God with us,

We prepare for a season that captures our imagination.

We wait expectantly for celebrations, delighting in the anticipation.

We embrace patience and remind ourselves of the waiting for Jesus Christ.

Make us impatient, Lord.

Make us tired of waiting.

Make us ready to rip open the gifts that we put aside for a special day.

Because justice cannot wait.

Peace cannot wait.

People are suffering and the planet is aching.

Force us out of the comfort of waiting and the safety of constantly preparing without acting.

Give us the energy and the passion to use what we already have to bring about change.

Capture our imaginations, Lord, so that we will imagine a world where people no longer have to wait for a better future,

Because you are already with us and you are ready to celebrate with us

Right here.

Right now.

Today, and not tomorrow.

**Amen**

*Prayers of Intercession*

In a world where it is easier to be passive  
We give thanks for the people who show us how to be active.  
For the people who stand up for other people's rights with local authorities, national governments  
and international courts,  
For young people who speak as adults, even when threatened and intimidated by those for whom  
silence is beneficial,  
For people who put themselves in the midst of suffering and unrest in the hope that they might  
contribute to change.  
Be with the activists, Lord.

In a world where it is easier to be ignorant  
We give thanks for those who inform us.  
For journalists who tell the unheard stories,  
For researchers who delve into problems and search for solutions,  
For teachers who encourage questioning and curiosity.  
Be with those who inform us, Lord.

In a world where it is easier to be apathetic  
We give thanks for those who care.  
For doctors and nurses and healthcare professionals who try to ease other people's suffering,  
For people who tend to and nurture the land and who try to protect the environment,  
For artists and artisans who create and craft items for others to enjoy.  
Be with the passionate, Lord.

In a world where it is easy to feel alone, remind us of all the people who are part of the body of  
Christ  
And be with us, Lord.

**Amen**

*Hymn: Let me walk in love beside you*

Let me walk in love beside you  
All along life's dusty road  
Hearing, knowing every burden  
Let me help to share your load

Wounds and pain arise to rob us  
Of a love community  
Guard me from a self-importance  
Seeing you as less than me

Let me rise and risk for justice  
Walk a mile within your shoes  
Striving for a world that's far too  
Precious in God's eyes to lose

Whether sitting or if active  
May we always do what's best  
God the focus of attention  
God our source, our work, our rest.

Words copyright RNC Stanyon 13 November 2019  
Tune: St Andrews (Edward Henry Thorne 1834-1916)

*Benediction*

As God is with us through Jesus called Emmanuel, may God be with you as you leave this place. Take with you the hope that the birth of Jesus brought to the world. The child born under occupation grew up to show the world the way of peace and to bring light even into the darkest of places. Let us take that hope to light the darkness of our world today, and may the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.

**Amen**

## Week Three: Power

*'God often does the exact opposite of what we expect. Throughout the narrative of the Gospels, Jesus tells the religious teachers that they are completely wrong about their understanding of God's action in the world.'*

The Children's Society

### Old Testament Reading

*Isaiah 35:1-10: A Vision of Plenty*

Isaiah 35 appears in the section of Isaiah that is often termed 'Proto-Isaiah' (Isaiah 1-39), which is attributed to an eighth century writer, earlier than the rest of the book. Scholars often attribute chapter 35 to a later date than the rest of Proto-Isaiah, however, as the image of the highway that will lead God's people into Jerusalem (Isaiah 35:8-10) is mirrored in the highway in the wilderness in Isaiah 40. Although Isaiah 36-39 narrates the Assyrian campaign against Judah and King Hezekiah's response, it seems to be an interruption to Isaiah 34 and 35 rather than a continuation of it. Isaiah 34 speaks of environmental destruction, only to be followed by Isaiah 35's vision of a flourishing land.

If we read Isaiah 35 in response to Isaiah 34 and in the context of a nation that had suffered the campaigns of the Assyrians and, potentially, the Babylonians, we see a vision of a land that has not been ravaged by war but flourishes under God's care. Isaiah 35 speaks of the wilderness, the dry land and the desert (Isaiah 35:1-6). In the context of chapter 34, this is not the wilderness in which the Israelites wandered during the exodus. Rather, the wilderness is a broken land, overtaken by thorns and thistles, populated by wildcats, goat-demons (not simply goats; the Hebrew word *sa.ir* is most likely related to the Greek satyr and is always used negatively) and the Queen of the Night, Lilith. Water was turned to pitch in chapter 34 and plants withered. In chapter 35, the 'waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert'; clean water will restore the broken land of chapter 34 and the people will rejoice in a flourishing land.

The control of water has long been a tactic in warfare. The ancient city of David was built near to the Gihon Spring so that it could make use of its water supply. According to 2 Chronicles 32, the spring was at risk of being claimed by the Assyrian army, which would have meant that the invading army would have had water and the besieged city would not. The building of the Siloam Tunnel, which brought water into the Pool of Siloam within Jerusalem, ensured that the city would still have water in the event of a siege.

Conflict can make a land barren and polluted, as in Isaiah 34. Isaiah 35 turns the image of environmental destruction around. In the ancient Near Eastern understanding, all wars were God's wars as deities were instrumental in the success or failure of battles.

Isaiah 34 attributes the destruction to YHWH's anger because this was the cultural understanding at the time, but it is also God who brings water and growth in the plan for the kingdom of God coming on earth (eschatological vision). With today's understanding, we must acknowledge the effect that our actions have on others.

### Gospel Reading

*Week 3: Which 'King of the Jews'? (Matthew 2: 1-12)*

Chapter 1 ends with the birth and naming of Jesus, as per angelic instruction. The stage is set: God's Liberator is born. As the audience, we have already been primed to expect a fight, and so Matthew moves immediately to introduce the Empire's chief local protagonist, Herod. It is in Herod that the Empire strikes back.

Chapter 2 contrasts two responses to God's saving initiative in the birth of Jesus, beginning with Herod, Rome's vassal king. Furthermore, Matthew suggests from the outset a deadly alliance of interests between Herod's court and the religious elite centred on the Temple, the chief priests and scribes.

It is their advice to Herod that results in the slaughter of the Bethlehem boys (Matthew 2:4-6). Secondly, God's initiative is welcomed and prosecuted by two unlikely groups: the Gentile magi and Mary and Joseph, marginal peasants who receive angelic revelations, guard the life of the child and protect the divine purpose against Herod's murderous attempts to thwart it.

Jesus will begin his ministry with the announcement, "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is about to arrive!" (Matthew 4:17). This, as we have seen, is not heaven vs earth, but heaven come down to earth. We should think of the contrast between the kingdom of heaven and the world of empire (which the Bible calls 'sin') as two possible versions of our world. Either it is all that God intended it to be at creation, or it is the world of Empire, which is the counterfeit kingdom. Empire, therefore, is the satanic alternative to the world in which God's rules apply. Matthew introduces Jesus as 'the Messiah, the son of David' (Matthew 1:1), and notes that he is crucified as 'Jesus, the King of the Jews' (Matthew 27:37). His Christmas story pits Jesus against Herod the Great as a contest for the true claimant to the title, 'King of the Jews'. Is the true 'King of the Jews' the Messiah who will save his people (ultimately by giving his own life) or the Roman vassal king and collaborator with the occupation, who lives lavishly at the expense of his people? Moreover, as we shall see, Matthew probes the nature of kingship under God by posing the question, 'Which version of Davidic kingship?'

Herod the Great was well known for three reasons that feature in the story of Jesus. Firstly, he instituted a lavish and skilful building programme that included filling in the gap between two conical hills to build a fortified summer palace at Herodion, complete with swimming pools; a massive port that used underwater concrete (Caesarea Maritima); and, most importantly, the enormous temple that Jesus knew, built on his constructed temple platform, of which the Western Wall is a survivor. Secondly, however, his building programme was financed by a huge burden of taxation on the populace, for which he was massively unpopular. That was aggravated by further taxes to fund lavish gifts that he made to the Roman emperor. Thirdly, he was infamous for his paranoia, which led him to respond with legendary ruthlessness to any perceived threat to his power and dynasty. This had already led to the murder of a wife and two sons. Matthew, however, foregrounds a fourth reason, his collusion with Rome. Herod had gone to Rome after the death of his predecessor and had been appointed as 'King of the Jews'. He used Roman support to bolster his power and wealth, adding significantly to the tax burden on the very poorest and just-coping (i.e. Jesus' peasant audience in Galilee), enforcing the occupation. He was dependent on Rome, and was the visible, Jewish face of Rome on the Judean streets, just as Jesus is the visible face of God with us.

In summary:

### **Jesus**

'Son of Abraham' (i.e. Jewish)  
Messiah  
Appointed by God  
New Moses  
New Exodus  
Shepherd King  
Recognised by the magi

### **Herod**

Edomite (i.e. non-Jewish)  
Oppressor  
Appointed by Rome  
New Pharaoh  
New Slavery  
Royal King  
Not recognised by the magi

Matthew emphasises the confrontation between the kingdom of God and the Roman Empire through the magi. Jesus is born on the margins in Bethlehem, a tiny village that had even been forgotten as the birthplace of King David.

Jerusalem and Herod's court have no knowledge of the events to which we, as his audience, are privy. It is the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem that bring about the confrontation. The level of threat is emphasised by Herod's response to the news of Jesus' birth: 'He was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him' (Matthew 2:3). This is a credible threat. Note the following elements of the narrative that Matthew has set up:

- Magi were regarded as a potential threat to empires and rulers because of their supposed ability to be able to predict imminent disasters for the rulers.
- They arrive in Jerusalem and begin making public enquiries about the 'child who has been born king of the Jews'. They do not go to Herod's court, or acknowledge Herod as king. Herod has to go to them, rather than they to him.
- They claim to be following a star that appeared at Jesus' birth, a heavenly portent and confirmation that something extraordinarily significant is happening on earth.
- Upon enquiry of the chief priests and scribes, Herod learns that the birthplace of the Messiah is Bethlehem ('City of David'). He knows immediately that David was anointed the [true] king of Israel while Saul was still on the throne!

Both Jerusalem and Bethlehem are known as the 'City of David': Bethlehem, as his birthplace, and Jerusalem, as his political capital and centre of the royal tradition, the temple, the palace and the Davidic covenant.

The account of Israel's move to a monarchy is deeply ambivalent in the Biblical texts (1 Samuel 8). The people ask Samuel, 'Give us a king to govern us, like the other nations' (1 Samuel 8:5). They confirm this choice in verse 20: "We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles!" The point is that Israel is supposed to be unlike other nations, with YHWH as its king.

They want a king who will behave like every ruler of every Empire. In this sense, David proves to be the ideal king. He is an empire builder. Under his rule, Israel becomes a strong, independent regional power. But it is under David's rule that the whole apparatus of the standing army, the metropolis, taxation and serfdom are established. David rules from his political and military capital, Jerusalem, which becomes known as the City of David. By the time of Jesus' birth, people have forgotten Bethlehem as the City of David. It wasn't the centre of the Empire.

However, there is an earlier point in the story of David where he was more of a shepherd-king than the warrior-king we tend to think of, i.e. the shepherd who puts his life on the line for the sheep. The David who takes on Goliath with a slingshot and pebbles, significantly after taking off King Saul's borrowed armour, symbolically representing an alternative to a military solution/model of kingship. This is the David of Bethlehem.

That we are meant to hear 'shepherd-king' because of the Bethlehem location for Jesus' birth and childhood is clear from the citation of Micah 5:2: 'Out of [Bethlehem] will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people, Israel'. Matthew is therefore flagging that 'son of David' will come to mean something very

different in Jesus from popular expectation. Jesus is the promised Messiah. He is the Davidic king of the Jews, he will bring about the end of Empire and bring in the New Creation of the Kingdom, but all of these can only be interpreted in the light of the cross and Jesus' self-sacrifice.

In this way, Matthew uses the genealogy to undermine, rather than legitimise this Davidic Royal/Warrior tradition. God's salvation in Jesus is coming from the margins, rather than the Jerusalem Temple. Matthew has told us clearly that the Temple is aligned with Herod, not with the people/Jesus/God. They are both part of the Empire. All of Jerusalem is terrified by the enquiries about the new king being made by the magi. Jerusalem is the place of the powerful and wealthy elites who make the lives of the poor a living hell. It is hugely significant, therefore, that the magi worship in the Bethlehem home of Mary and Joseph, rather than in the Temple in Jerusalem, where God was supposed to dwell. God is not to be found in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies, but in the form of the baby, Jesus, who is 'God with us'. The peasant home on the margins has become the new Holy of Holies.

This means that we must not understand the 'us' of 'God is with us' in the universal sense of 'with all humanity'. The 'us' of this verse are the poor, dispossessed and marginalised, as well as the faithful Gentiles, as opposed to the rich and powerful. What they have in common is that they recognise what is happening at Jesus' birth as a new, saving act of God, which is Good News for the little people and bad news for the rich and powerful.

Thus, discipleship means taking sides with the victims of Empire. Underpinning Matthew's Christmas story is the sense that God intervenes in this world on behalf of those who are made victims. It is a reminder that God is the Liberator who hears the cry of God's people when they are slaves in Egypt. So, the magi are led by a star to the birth of a new king and when they have seen the Christ they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. They are overwhelmed with joy when they come into the presence of the true king and they grasp the threat he poses to the corrupt regime of the wicked Herod. They take sides. They position themselves with those who are marginal.

### *Experience on the ground*

Today, the Gihon Spring is controlled by the Ir David Foundation, an Israeli settler organisation that aims to increase the presence of settlements in occupied East Jerusalem. This aim has resulted in the illegal claiming of houses and evictions of families.

Water is also controlled throughout the West Bank. Within the Palestinian territories, the water supply is controlled. In some places, there is only running water once every 7-21 hours, depending on the specific area. All cleaning and laundry have to be done when the water is turned on, before water tanks on the roofs of houses are filled, which have to see each household through until they have running water again.

By contrast, the settlements have a constant supply of fresh water. Even in the middle of the desert, settlements are green and lush due to plentiful irrigation and settlers have swimming pools and fountains whilst nearby villages are forced to store their water. The Bedouin village of Al Khan Al Ahmar, which struggles to access fresh water, was flooded with wastewater from a nearby settlement in 2018.

When we withhold what others have need of, we cannot blame God. When resources are shared rather than weaponised for political gain, we can work towards making the eschatological vision a reality. We have the resources needed to turn war-ravaged land into flourishing places of peace, but politics and conflict can make our world like the land of Isaiah 34. An end to conflict will allow the earth's resources to be shared and for there to be enough for all.

## **Worship Resources**

*Call to Worship (based on OT reading)*

The power of God is Soul Power,

**Soul Power reigns always!**

From the wilderness to blossoming field,

**Soul power reigns always!**

To fearful souls and enslaved bodies:

**Soul Power reigns always!**

For opened eyes and unstopped ears:

**Soul Power reigns forever!**

Like Springs of Water, our anticipation turns into praise

As we seek God with Us.

**Let us worship God, with Soul Power!**

*Prayers of Praise and Confession*

Your power...ALL power, is in the life of a baby.

Not in tyrants with lofty palaces and brutal minds. Not in soldiers who guard concrete and imaginary borders. Not in the natural resources and reservoirs and opportunities restricted by those who rule. Nor is it in the silence of individuals who benefit from others' power. All power is in the life of a baby.

In the life of a baby, even tax collectors and sinners find love. In the life of a baby, princes and princesses make long journeys to find power.

In the life of a baby, local heroes in the land of Abraham find courage to speak out, loud, with armed guards surrounding them. In the life of a baby, communities in the desert can find hope.

Your power...ALL power, is in the life of a baby.

As we seek to draw near to all this life, all *this* power, we make ourselves aware of who we are:

**We are your children. Often, we are broken, often our scars show, often we leave more undone than we leave completed. Yet you empower us with forgiveness, so that we can know life abundantly. We are ever in need of your grace and mercy. We give thanks that it is free and open to us every day of our lives. Amen.**

*Prayers of Intercession*

We gather as people in an age of progress and challenge. We have seen our planet from the outer limits of our solar system in the images beamed back to us in modern technological marvels. The world of the child born in Bethlehem knew no planets. The stars hung like Christmas trees on a world that was singular and flat.

So much power, so much knowledge. Yet, the more things change the more they stay the same. Though our vantage point has changed, our relationship to each other hasn't. So, we pray for our fragmented

world, a world that continues to make refugees unwanted, continues to make children suffer, continues to make slavery a practice, continues to make prejudice the order of the day.

Give us discerning eyes and active spirits that will, like springs of water, change our minds and in so doing, save our planet. We remember places like Israel where human rights are abused and respect for the environment is equally discarded. We pray for victims of environmental racism. We pray for all activists, chaplains, and scientists, particularly those who work to change our hearts on climate change. Make us better stewards of your creation.

As the magi approached Herod, we continue to search for you in the lofty places. But you are on the side of the 'little' people. We remember the skid rows, the alley ways, the shanty towns, bombed out buildings, where great suffering is present in the people who reside there, but also so much great promise. Children who will be the next leaders, homeless who will be able to find shelter and a life worth living, ex-convicts who desire redemption. From the margins, may we find the future of our world, hoping for us who have given up.

Empowering God, give your Church courage to speak truth to power so that the most unloved will be cared for, the most greedy will find redemption, and the most vulnerable will find strength.

Hear our prayers and keep us living in faith and never in fear.

O come, Emmanuel. **Amen.**

*Hymn: Your Life is Gift to All*

Life, hope and joy are in the child  
Who comes to make all things new;  
Within the sorrows of our time,  
A childlike wisdom is due.  
To speak to power, to light a flame  
And warm hearts that have grown cold.  
*Lord, give us courage to help us see  
Your life is gift to all.*

Our God is with us, and will weep  
When sufferings of our design  
Destroy and limit the flourishing  
Of Love, the child of our time.  
God, on the side of suffering,  
You call us to make peace.  
*Lord, give us courage to help us see  
Your life is gift to all.*

When we withhold what others need  
We cannot blame the Lord,  
But help us to hope's embrace  
That it will be reborn.  
From ravaged wars to rivers flowed,  
Our calling to fulfil.  
*Lord, give us courage to help us see  
Your life is gift to all.*

Restore our broken lands, O God,  
With streams in deserts, heal!  
May everlasting love now flow  
Where all injustice steals  
The hopes of young and beautiful hearts  
Your children, weak and still.  
*Lord, give us courage to help us see  
Your life is gift to all.*

Words copyright William Thomas Young (19 November 2019)  
Tune: Carol 8.6.8.6 D by Richard S. Willis (1819-1900)

*Benediction*

Get ready, People of God:

**God's Liberator is coming!**

Rise up, all you who have been made low:

**God's Liberator is coming!**

Sit down and listen, leaders and zealots:

**God's Liberator is coming!**

In the midst of sadness and uncertainty, God is ever present, ever seeking, ever in love with us, and this is how we know:

**God's Liberator is coming!**

Go forth in peace, empowered by the Creator's care, Christ's compassion, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen!**

## Week Four: Equality

*"If a human being suffers somewhere else, how can they go and inflict suffering on someone else?"*

Jehoakim, our tour guide from Ramallah to rural West Bank

### Old Testament Reading

*Isaiah 56:1-8: A Vision of Unity*

The change in tone and style between Isaiah 40-55 and Isaiah 56 indicates the beginning of a new section. Isaiah 56-66 contains varied texts that most likely originate from a number of different authors over a couple of centuries. These chapters are generally considered to be post-exilic and are known collectively as Trito-Isaiah (third Isaiah). The Babylonian exile is over, and the exiles have either returned home or have settled in new places, beginning the scattered community of the people of Israel around the world (diaspora). The question now is 'What happens next?'

For the returning exiles who were trying to forge a new national identity for the post-exilic period, their options were either exclusivity or inclusivity. By closing ranks and focusing on who was in the group (as seen in Ezra and Nehemiah), the exiles could form a sense of unity and identity. The later sections of Isaiah, however, push towards a universalistic view of YHWH and embracing foreigners. This is seen in Isaiah 56.

While there is comment on the Sabbath, covenant and the temple ('my house of prayer'), these cornerstones of Second Temple Judaism are not restricted to the returning exiles. The foreigner may "minister" to YHWH (i.e. serve in the temple) and all who keep the Sabbath "and hold fast to my covenant" will be welcome at the holy mountain that has featured so prominently throughout Isaiah's visions. Justice and right practice are central, not who is in or out. All are equal under God.

### Gospel Reading

*Matthew 2: 13-23: New Moses and a New Exodus*

The massacre of the infants makes sense only if we realise that there is a two-year gap between chapters one and two. The star that the magi follow appeared two years before their arrival in Jerusalem/Bethlehem. This timing is what Herod had been so anxious to ascertain from the magi (Matthew 2:7) and why he determines to massacre all the boys up to the age of two years old.

There is no source outside the Bible that mentions Herod's slaughter of the Bethlehem babies, even among his critics. Furthermore, Matthew (as we shall see in a moment) is explicitly concerned to shape his narrative to echo the story of Moses and Exodus. Does Matthew quote a tradition about the massacre of the infants, or does he introduce it in order to echo Pharaoh's slaughter of the Hebrew boy slaves? Both are equally likely on the basis of the historical evidence available. The question of 'What actually happened?' cannot therefore be answered conclusively.

That having been said, there are several important factors that count strongly in favour of it having happened:

- It is consistent with Herod's well-attested paranoia about possible threats to his position. He was deeply unpopular and depended on a police state to protect him against his own people. He had murdered at least one wife and two sons because he had seen them as a threat to his throne.
- The murder of children as a military tactic was commonplace as a way of subjugating a defeated enemy. It was a way of wiping out the future of an enemy population. This is the significance of the death of the firstborn of Egypt at Passover.

- Because it was common enough to be taken for granted, it would not have been surprising enough to have been considered a 'war crime', or a 'crime against humanity' worth particular mention. In this sense, it is probably wrong-headed to expect confirmation from extra-biblical sources. After all, we understand that, as part of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian soldiers killed Jewish babies by swinging their heads against rocks only indirectly from Psalm 137:9; it did not need chronicling as an unexpected or unique event because it happened so often.
- The vulnerability of children does not mean that crimes against children were viewed as particularly heinous, as they (rightly) are in our society. Children were at the very bottom of the social family pyramid, less useful even than slaves. They were considered as 'fair game' to be killed, sold, traded, enslaved or used sexually before puberty/adulthood at the whim of their parents and elders. The slaughter of children would not therefore be viewed as evidence of unusual cruelty or depravity on Herod's part.

Moreover, what is most important is the significance of Matthew's narrative for his presentation of Jesus as the New Moses. His mission of the kingdom as a New Exodus does not depend on whether the massacre of the infants actually took place. We need to take Matthew's story on its own terms if we are to learn the truth about Jesus that he wishes us to discover.

What we do need to note is the very clear way in which Matthew shapes his narrative to echo the Exodus story. At the outset of his ministry, Matthew has Jesus go up a mountain and give the New Law (the Sermon on the Mount) to the new Israel (the disciples), evoking the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. The crossing of the Red Sea is paralleled by the stilling of the storm and the provision of manna in the wilderness is evoked by the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

Here, in the Christmas story, Matthew evokes the lead-up to the Exodus, with Israel enslaved in Egypt:

- As Jacob and his sons had done, Joseph is commanded to seek safety for his family in Egypt.
- By the time of Moses, Israel had become a slave nation under Pharaoh, and needed delivering. They left Egypt for the Promised Land, just as Joseph will leave Egypt for Nazareth once Herod has died. As Israel was known as 'God's son', so, via the angel, God will call 'God's son', Jesus, out of Egypt.
- Just as Pharaoh sought to destroy the Hebrew baby boys in order to insure against a numerical threat to his empire 'from below', so Herod plans the slaughter of the Bethlehem infant boys in order to eradicate any threat to his own empire 'from below'.
- As the death of Egypt's first-born are the catalyst for the Exodus, so the death of Herod is the catalyst for Jesus' own 'exodus' from Egypt.

There is another connection Matthew wants to make, which is with the Exile. The quotation from Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children is a reference to two historical disasters: the destruction by Assyria of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BC. The point of the citation is twofold. Firstly, it echoes the grief of the mothers of Bethlehem, and links it to the hopeless grief of the exiles from both Israel and Judah. Secondly, it reminds them that Jeremiah, the prophet of the Babylonian Exile, was also the prophet of hope. God would act to save the people in ways they couldn't have dreamed of.

Matthew is saying to his audience:

- Herod is the latest in a long, unbroken line of imperial tyrants that have always opposed God's vision for the world as a place of justice, peace and flourishing for everyone, even the very least.
- God is always the Exodus God who hears the groans of the people in slavery and acts out of compassion and with power to stand against and destroy all empire's slave systems.
- God's people have been here before: in Egypt, in Israel and in Babylon. God has not changed. To be God is to be the Liberator of the slaves and the destroyer of the Pharaohs. God saves!
- God is doing something about the situation of occupation in the world right now, through Jesus. It starts on the margins, in the places you'd least expect and among the most unexpected people. But they are the people whose history includes Exodus and return from exile, so wait impatiently, pray earnestly and hang on to your hats!

### *Experience on the ground*

Isaiah 56:5 says: "I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." The term yad vashem ("a monument and a name") is used today for the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. The exhibition pays tribute to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the people who tried to protect them. It is a powerful and sobering place to visit. It is a reminder of the need for safety and security that influenced the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

However, the desire for security can lead to the building of walls and the rise of exclusivity within groups. We see this in Nehemiah with the rebuilding of the city walls and the forbidding of mixed marriages. We see this in America with the border wall. And we see this in modern Israel with the separation barrier and the country's nuclear arsenal.

There are also projects in Israel, however, that are working for reconciliation and seeking to bridge divides, to maintain justice and gather people together, as Isaiah 56 preaches. In Cana in Galilee, a non-profit social enterprise called Sindyanna aims to bring together Jewish and Arab women to provide opportunities for women and to promote cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. This non-profit makes world-class olive oil (listed as one of the world's top 100 extra virgin olive oils), and soaps, herb mixes, honey, woven baskets and embroidery. Lush, a British based cosmetics company, uses its oil in some of their products. In the course of working together, workers learn each other's languages and provide opportunities for Arab farmers to sell to Israeli markets.

Groups such as Sindyanna are seeking to find common ground amidst the ongoing conflict and to produce Fairtrade products that benefit both parties. The equality and unity that is the bedrock of Sindyanna embodies Isaiah's visions of hope. Conflict and trauma can lead to further divisions and social exclusivity, but it can also be channelled into work that promotes unity and understanding.

## **Worship Resources**

### *Call to Worship*

This is a space of waiting:

**A house of prayer for all people.**

This is a space for the brokenness of the world:

**A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and much lament...**

This is a space for hope:

**Out of Egypt, God calls the child of promise.**

This is a space to meet the One who has always been here:

**Emmanuel, God with us!**

### *Prayers of Approach and Confession*

In a world where prejudices live in us and we act them out, you love all of us as if there were only one of us.

In a society where impatient hearts live, you show us the value and joy of waiting and keeping still.

In an economy where 1 %hold the most wealth, you call for flourishing for everyone.

In a culture ever changing, your love remains constant.

Such a brutal world, and yet 'beautiful values' are present to keep us grounded, keep us interdependent, keep us close to you.

Hear us as we make ourselves aware of who we are and Whose we are:

**We are your children, precious in your sight. Monuments to your grace, you call us by name. Though we often live without hope, you come to give us peace beyond understanding. Though we miss the mark of your love, you never stop loving us. As you forgive us, may we have the courage to accept your love, poured out to all the world. Amen.**

### *Prayers of Intercession*

*Without travel documents, a family crossed borders. A family of strangers were welcomed and protected in Egypt.*

We pray for those fleeing persecution, seeking asylum. We remember also the families who cannot escape, who live in horror, fear and hope. We remember communities like the Bedouins who righteously defy governmental restrictions so they can provide for their families. We remember people in oppressed communities who continue to believe in love and hospitality when all around them seems like hell.

*Mary and Joseph protected their gift.*

We celebrate children as Divine gifts, giving you thanks for the hope they bring. Help us to protect our young people, in our church, in our schools, encouraging policies locally and globally to invest in the future. Whatever wisdom the church may give to them can be constant reminders of how much they are loved, of affirmation and possibility.

*Mary and Joseph had to move on.*

We pray for our world in transitions: New political arrangements. The reality of foodbanks and centres of support which are symbols of deep inequality. The cries for governments (including Israel) to take climate disruption seriously. We lift up even the trauma of our personal lives which call for a change out of us. Such transitions require renewed commitment, listening to the heart, a desire for your presence as we navigate the transitions of life.

**Amen.**

*Hymn: O Come, All Ye Faithful*

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;  
come and behold him, born the King of angels;

*O come, let us adore him; O come, let us adore him; O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

God of God, Light of Light;  
lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb;  
very God, begotten not created;

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,  
sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above;  
glory to God, all glory in the highest

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;  
Jesus, to thee be all glory giv'n;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing;

Words: Attributed to John Francis Wade  
Tune: Adeste Fideles  
Words and Tune: Public Domain

*Benediction*

May the hope that is born in the world  
**Be born in us today!**

May the justice that is secured for the world  
**Be born in us today!**

May the power that revolutionises our world  
**Be born in us today!**

May the unity of the Creator, The Redeemer and The Spirit  
**Be born in us today!**