Blairgowrie Christmas I 291213

Matthew 2: 13-23

The Christmas story would be fine if it ended with the visit of the Wise Men and their gifts. Mysterious strangers from far away highlight for us the universal significance of the child Jesus. But already a shadow falls – they are warned to go home by another way. The warning in Joseph’s dream is very clear. He must take his family to safety in Egypt because Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.

I have had the experience of being with people who feel driven to move for their own safety. The first parish in which I worked was on the north side of Belfast – that period in Belfast saw what were described as the greatest movements of population since the Second World War. When the world feels unstable and dangerous, people huddle together with their own. The Catholic population of Belfast crammed into the west – and began to edge across into North Belfast which is still an unstable and edgy place today. Families moved – sometimes in a measured and thoughtful way. But sometimes they just went – intimidated or threatened or just afraid of being threatened. Whatever it was, when they lost their nerve, no power on earth could persuade them to stay where they were. Such fear is dreadful and undignified – but entirely understandable.

It is also very common. Untold thousands of people from Syria are in Jordan and other surrounding countries. The Karen people of Burma are in camps just across the border with Thailand. People are fleeing South Sudan as we meet today. And all the time there is the movement of people from Somalia, Eritrea and other sub-Saharan countries – risking their lives in skimpy boats on the Mediterranean to get away from economic deprivation and violence and to reach Europe

What are we to think about all this and what do we learn about the action of God. It isn’t easy. I ask myself particularly about why Joseph should have been privileged with a warning. If you had been the parent of one of the many children killed by Herod in the search for Jesus you might feel that you had been dealt with unjustly.

That is a deeply uncomfortable thought and I don’t have an answer to it. It’s unjust and untidy. But then the suffering and pain of the world are caused by people and not by God. Herod – like all other leaders whose main interest is in power – was terrified by the stories of a new king with a special kind of authority. His only response to such a threat would be a violent one. Suffering and pain are caused by people. The church and its life seem a long way from that but you can often see the same themes played out there. Part of my life in ministry is spent taking the strain of relationship with people who threaten and occasionally bully, who want to exercise power rather than take seriously the needs and feelings of others.

But none of this is inevitable. I read a comment yesterday from one of the parties in the Northern Ireland talks – that what they needed was a De Klerk figure. He meant that those holding and defending the unjust use of power need to find a way of relinquishing it – and they need a Nelson Mandela too. It would have been a brave person who would have said that apartheid government in South Africa would end without violence – and yet the point at which Mandela in prison decided that he would choose the path of reconciliation with former enemies became the moment at which such blood-letting ceased to be inevitable.

This story also tells us something very important about where God is. The child Jesus is born to a refugee family in a time of violence. As today’s story shows, his early life is fragile and risky – not a life of privilege and security. Yet it is such people in such risky times who become particularly aware of God’s presence and sustaining power – it is those who are rich and apparently secure who find it difficult to respond to the call of God.