

Views from the Pews – What happened after Christmas?

Three Gospels concentrate on tales of recognition and endorsement, confirmation of Jesus' identity. A great poetic example is Simeon's testimony in what we know as the Nunc Dimitis.

Saint Matthew on the other hand deals with that difficult story, the story of Pogrom, of Massacre of Innocents, of Flight into Egypt. Herod, like most dictators, was paranoid about competition; he well knew that a Messiah meant that he would no longer be above the law. A new Law was on the horizon. Matthew's account has a ring of political authenticity that catches the eye. Astrologers are recruited as double agents; but disappear after leaving their gifts in the stable. Was it conscience, fear, or a dream that led them to melt away?

They had every reason to. Herod had relied on them, and Matthew makes no bones about what then happened. Herod could not cope with being tricked, and ordered something appalling – the killing of every child under two, in Bethlehem and its surrounds. One is tempted to suspect that, given the movement caused by Quirinius' directive, the slaughter went further, perhaps throughout Judaea. This might well explain the Angel's warning to Joseph that the family needed to get to Egypt, possibly 200 kilometres away.

We can only guess at the logistics Herod put in place. Matthew does not record the numbers of children killed, but at 2:20 he has the Angel reassuring Joseph that 'the men who threatened the child's life are dead.' It was only safe to return home after Herod's death. Even then the Holy Family went to Galilee rather than Judaea. The territory was still unsafe for children who had been visited by astrologers and shepherds.

This makes for tough reading, as it challenges our usual emotional response to Christmas. But we need constant reminders that Christ was once a refugee, travelling we know not how, reliant on Egyptian border policy, subject to we know not how many security checks, always at risk of being labelled an outsider ripe for repatriation. The Church has an opportunity here, for its Founder was once in need of refuge. We need to challenge modern conflations between refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. Not all such are conveniently white, Christian, culturally acceptable or proficient in the hosts' language. We confidently assert that Christ will return. Will He do so as a refugee, a role He knows well?

- Richard Swarbrick