

## **Herod's massacre at Bethlehem (Matthew 2:13-18)**

**Clare Menck for Mt Hawthorn Community Church, 6 September 2015**

*(After reading aloud both Jeremiah 31:10-20 and Matthew 2:1-23)*

Today we are particularly looking at the part of that passage about Herod massacring the children.

**So to start with I want to invite you to be in touch with what is your gut reaction to this passage?**

*Allow time.*

Now I was asked to speak on this passage weeks ago, but in a weird confluence of events it has been a week of gut reaction to the death of children. My reaction is a sort of repulsed desolation. And I shy away from it. My psychological defences will not allow me to enter into 'imagine of that was me'. I've been preparing this for two weeks and every time I get to that question I shut down; I can't do it.

**For those of you not up for a sermon today (or not up for THIS sermon today!), I invite you to just be present to your gut reaction. Hold it up to the Light of God. Allow it to simply be true. This you, in this place, with this response, is loved and welcome.**

**So the obvious question is:** Did this massacre actually happen?

There is no external evidence outside of scripture for this happening. Josephus, the first century historian who did a detailed history of the life of Herod over several volumes, doesn't mention it.

But it does fit with the known character of Herod, and particularly of Herod in the last years of his reign. He was paranoid, he was ruthless. He responded to even the slightest hint of a threat to his rule by killing people. He killed three of his sons and he strangled his favourite wife, and the country was a place of chaos and violence. (He also brought great order and structure and economic prosperity to his people, and he is remembered for that too.)

So it's possible. Christian tradition has this as a death of hundreds if not thousands of children, but we are talking about a population at most of about a thousand people, with high infant mortality. We're looking at maybe twenty children. And it's quite possible that the death of twenty children in a chaotic time with a despotic ruler would not have come to the attention of the official historian.

The arguments against it being an actual event include that it is too 'theologically perfect' in Matthew's narrative. But I have to hold open the possibility that theologically perfect coincidences can actually happen.

There are also arguments that to believe that the massacre happened you have to also believe in the magi and the star that came down and sat over a stable, which modern physics and astronomy tell us is not possible, but even the slightest hint of an astrological prediction of this sort being fulfilled in Herod's day would have inspired a massacre of this sort. So I don't think we need to buy the whole package, with all the details, to believe that something of this nature may very well have happened. We do need to hold open that it may not have happened, but I tend to lead towards thinking that it probably did.

## **So what role does it have in Matthew?**

Matthew is very concerned with the Old Testament being fulfilled in the life of Jesus, and in chapter one and two he's setting up the credentials of Jesus the Messiah. And he does this through showing Jesus 'fulfilling' the Old Testament. It's a type of prophecy fulfilment called 'typology'. It's not about saying 'next Thursday at two o'clock somebody will come' and then 'look! somebody came!' therefore the prophecy was fulfilled. It's more like saying 'my mother was left handed; Clare is left handed; therefore the prophecy is fulfilled that The Mother Will Be Left Handed'. It's about a full expression of something that has happened before.

In setting up the credentials of Jesus as the Messiah Matthew wants to show that the whole of God's history has led up to this point. So rather than retelling Israel's history, he gets Jesus to relive it, in the first two chapters, through the narrative.

## **What sort of Jesus is he trying to introduce in this way?**

He's wanting to introduce Jesus as a **King**. He's so self-evidently a king that Herod is afraid of him. And Herod inadvertently proclaims Jesus as king by being afraid of him, by recognising him as a genuine threat.

But Matthew wants to show that he's a **different sort of King**. So, he is demonstrating that there is Jesus the humble, innocent child king, and Herod the vicious, evil king. Not just two individual people, but the whole style. That God's way is this way of the incarnate upside-down kingship, and the way of the world is this way of Herod. Having the massacre of the children in there demonstrates the horror of the earthly way of doing power.

Matthew is concerned to show that Jesus is the **new David**, the prophecy fulfilment of the Messiah coming from Bethlehem. Now everybody new Jesus came from Nazareth, which was a very difficult fact to work into the narrative. So both Luke and Matthew find ways of explaining how Jesus actually came from Bethlehem when everyone knew he came from Nazareth. Luke is the story we more often know: that they travelled to Bethlehem because of the census, were there as visitors, and then went home again. Matthew implies that they lived in Bethlehem. Joseph probably had a business there; that was where they had a home. And because of this terrible violent event and threat to Jesus' life, they fled, and set up life in Nazareth as refugees. So, part of this story is saying 'this is the new, right, king in the footsteps of David'.

The strongest imagery is saying this is the **new Moses**, the new key redeemer figure for our people. In Jewish tradition, Pharaoh's edict to kill all the baby boys in Egypt followed from his seers and magicians coming to him and saying 'a baby has been born who will ruin Egypt, and set these people free'. That's not in the bible but it's in the Jewish tradition, so the use of that image: the magicians' warning; the Gentile king kills the baby boys; the redeemer baby is saved; there's a fleeing into exile (Moses flees as an adult, because he killed someone, but it's the same imagery); fleeing to and from Egypt; the evil king dies; the redeemer returns to place of origin to begin the saving work; it all happens in dreams; the movement is at night; the Angel of the Lord appears - the wording is nearly identical in a couple of verses from the two stories; the hero-figure returns with a family (the key adult, Joseph or Moses, comes with a wife and children in the transition). It's clearly a very deliberate parallel, telling the story of Jesus' life in a way that brings the whole story of Moses to say 'this is our new redeemer'. And the slaying of baby boys is a key part of establishing that story of the new Moses.

It's also showing him to be **the new Israel**. (It's OK in the bible for you to be contradictory images all at the same time; you can be David, Moses and Israel all at

once). The passage read is a quote from Hosea 'Out of Israel I called my son', and the original context of that is talking about the whole people of Israel coming out of Egypt. The 'son' is not an individual, it's the whole people. The weeping of Rachel ties this story to the whole people's exile to Babylon; to the grief of the whole people. And it shows Jesus embodying the fullness of that return from exile. The piece that we read today from Jeremiah - the prophecy that one day it would all come good - they're bringing in that language and saying 'here it is; now we have really come home from exile'.

Matthew is showing that this person he wants you to think is the Messiah is **chosen and protected by God**: the Angels, the miraculous escape. It's a really common formula for hero-stories of the Ancient Near East. There's examples all the way across Asia of the baby hero being saved from some sort of despotic ruler killing lots of people, being raised in exile and returning to save.

Matthew is using this to show that Jesus is arriving in **a violent world in need of saving**. It's the epitome of futile violence.

And Matthew is using this to show that Jesus is **one who provokes a response** in every single person. It's a theme right through the gospel as it goes on. Do we respond with the worship of Magi; do we respond like the Jerusalem elite who ignore the whole thing; do we respond with opposition to this, as Herod does. The massacre dramatises the range of responses.

It also sets Herod up as **the new Pharaoh**. It paints the picture of Israel as enslaved again. It's not Rome who is enslaving them. It's the puppet Jewish king, who is seen as illegitimate because he's not of David's line. So a prophecy that a king of David's line is coming is particularly threatening to Herod, who was always a bit fragile about the fact that he wasn't from David.

So that's what it's doing for Matthew.

### **BUT WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?**

**It is deeply troubling that slaughtered children appear to be used as a theological illustration.** It is not OK. And its problematic whether a massacre happened or not.

The death of children is an atrocity not because they are innocent but because they are human.

***If it did happen:*** Why did God allow this to happen? Or did God even cause it to happen, to make all those theological points, to have a 'theological coincidence' that the listeners can pick up? Matthew uses Old Testament fulfilment language throughout his gospel, particularly in the start but right through. Almost always when he talks about it he uses the language *hina*, which means 'then it happened, in order to fulfill', whereas in this piece (and when Judas kills himself) he uses *to-te*, which is just two things next to each other: 'this happened *and* it fulfilled', but the causation is removed. So I think even Matthew is backing away from the idea that God *causes* this.

But we cannot say that's OK. Why did God not save the other children? Because we have an interventionist God in this story. God saves one child. If God can save one child, God can save all those children.

I read a blog by someone called James McGrath, who gave an alternate way this story could have been written so it could do the theological thing it needed to do and not besmirch the idea of God. God could warn *all* the parents, with *all* the children, they could

all flee; and when the soldiers arrived they could find no children, and they would recognise that a miracle had occurred, and have a conversion experience; and they would return home to Herod and lie, saying 'we killed them all, there are none there'. Everybody's happy. But that's not the text we have.

***If this did not happen:*** It is not OK to fictionalise child slaughter for theological gain! It trivialises the grief of real situations. And it shows gospel writers writing without concern at linking their God to an atrocity of this nature. If it didn't happen, why would you link your God to something like this? If you didn't have to live with the fact that they were linked? There is something grotesque about that understanding of God.

In nearly everything I read about this, the commentators talk about how this passage works for a good theological outcome but they do not engage with what it says about atrocities. The quote from Jeremiah, which we heard this morning both in Jeremiah and in Matthew, of Rachel weeping: most people hear that and say Matthew is implying hope, implying that because in the original passage it is in the context of a sweep of saying 'it will get better, have hope', that therefore that's what we need to read in this story also. I'm not entirely convinced.

***If it did happen and we say it did not, because of our liberal Christian understanding of Scripture:*** We are silencing victims again.

**For those of you not up for a sermon today (or not up for THIS sermon): Who comes to mind for you in this passage? Hold them also up to the Light of God.** If that is all you do today, and you don't listen to me, that's wonderful.

**My interpretation of this passage is that this actually happened.** And Matthew knows it. Now if this happened and it's not well enough known to be included by Josephus, perhaps Matthew knows it because he or his community come from Bethlehem, or had links, or knew people who lost children. Matthew's written probably 70-85AD, so the actual women who wept are probably dead by now, but their other children may not be. If this was part of the memory of your parents, your siblings, you would know. And it would affect the way you connected with the Christian community who followed this Jesus.

Matthew honours those who died by memorialising them. He does not paint a pretty Christmas scene. He allows an uneasy truth to sit beside his messianic story. The problem with James McGrath's version of the story is that even if THIS massacre did not occur, others did, and do, and 'solving' this one by saying it is a fiction doesn't help us with the rest. It just defers the problem. It tows boats back so people die somewhere else, not on our biblical shores but still within the realm of God somewhere.

Matthew gives voice to the emotional state of the women. This is remarkable! This is a male-dominated text in a patriarchal culture. And their grief is allowed to stand without platitude.

A voice is heard in Ramah  
Lamenting and weeping bitterly.  
It is Rachel weeping for her children  
Refusing to be comforted  
Because they are no more.

Over 2000 years later, these women still have their loss acknowledged and their grief allowed a place in our sacred story. Something terrible happened when Jesus was born. Rather than hide it, Matthew gives its victims voice.

Rachel is the matriarch of Israel. In one tradition she's buried not far from Bethlehem. Bethlehem is about 10km south of Jerusalem, and Ramah is about 10km north. Ramah is a place where several Old Testament tragedies occurred, including it being the place where the captives were mustered to begin the march into exile in Babylon. It is the epitome of sadness in the history of the people of Israel. And Rachel is the grief of the whole nation. She is the mother of the people, in the place of their greatest sadness, with a quote from their saddest ever time of history. Putting the grief of the women of Bethlehem (and the dad's, but they're not in the story)... Putting their grief into the mouth of Rachel says: **your grief is part of our grief as a whole people. Your children are our children. We weep with you.** These potentially forgotten children – in a society that doesn't value children particularly highly – are upheld as valuable, their loss as tragic, their families' devastation as worthy of remembrance for all time.

Now although the commentators say Matthew intends you to hear those words about Rachel and have the implied hope of the other passage, I don't think he does. He doesn't include the words of hope – and he could, it's just another line. It is our modern Western compulsion to fix grief and make it go away that wants to hear those overtones. Matthew specifically doesn't. These women cannot be comforted, and he implies *and that's rightly so*.

Matthew doesn't offer a solution. He just continues to tell the story that sits parallel to human tragedy. And I would say not just parallel – but ultimately the story of Jesus enters into and entwines with and becomes the story of our human tragedy. This is the story of Jesus.

### **What place does this text have for us?**

People don't usually preach on this text, probably because it makes us uncomfortable. There's an annual 'feast day'. The 27<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup> Dec, depending on your tradition, is marked on every calendar every year in the Christian year as the feast to remember these children, but we don't stand up and preach on it the week after Christmas. But when I searched the web for stories, for input, lots of people DID preach on this text in December 2012. Can anyone think why that would be? Particularly Americans? On the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2012 someone took a gun to a school in Connecticut and shot dead twenty small children and eight adults, including themselves. Now, how people interpreted the passage varied greatly, but clearly in face of the Sandy Hook atrocity people needed to find an atrocity in their sacred text to relate to. And they found one.

I would say that the death of Syrian children has more in common with Herod's massacre in Bethlehem. Because Sandy Hook was an anomaly. It was one person doing something without a political overtone. The children who are dying today, this week, now, are seen as a threat to the establishment. They are the pawns of political games. Some adults' political agenda is having these children die. Children are expendable in the political games of the adult world.

If this text has nothing to say to you, perhaps your best response is 'thank God for that'. And allow it to be there for those desperately unfortunate people who find themselves needing it.

*And as a side note: the Gospel of Matthew was most likely written to a community in Syria.*

**This passage is a call to remember victims everywhere.** Victims of power games. Victims of political machinations. Victims of the 'powers and principalities', the structures of our world. We note – and rightly so – that Jesus is a refugee here. He probably was always looking over his shoulder; Joseph and Mary spent their life being careful that

nobody was after him; they never went back to Bethlehem where they came from; they were strangers in some other town. And so we should show compassion for refugees. But this passage has more to say about those who cannot flee: those who die in the conflict. Jesus turned up at the Egyptian border (so to speak) and was granted asylum. But the Bethlehem children died out of sight at home without a chance to flee; they didn't even make the official history. And Matthew calls us to have compassion for them, to include them as OUR CHILDREN, OUR GRIEF. Who are the hidden victims in our world? Not only the ones who reach out to us asking for help, but those who cannot escape and cannot reach out. Remember them. Weep for them.

**This story is a sign that Jesus' story is not just about his death.** If the point of Jesus coming was so that God's innocent son can be killed, there was no point having him survive the massacre of Bethlehem. You could have had the whole story done in three years. He could have come back from the dead, gone on, conquered death... Brilliant! If it's all about needing an innocent death to appease a cosmic God in some equation of sacrifice, you do not need to have Jesus survive this story. That God bothers to save him tells us that Jesus' life, not just his death, is important.

**This is a reminder that although grief is all-consuming when it is your own, it is one story among many stories, and part of a bigger whole.** Standing with those who mourn doesn't mean trying to change their grief. Matthew doesn't do that; he stands with that grief. But it also doesn't mean being entrapped in the grief. Matthew continues to tell the rest of the story, because that is also true. It's not MORE true, but it is also true.

**And this passage is a call to LIVE out of all this.** Often when tragedies occur, survivors will make statements about taking actions so a death is not 'in vain'. Aylan's father this week, through his tears, said 'May he be the last one'. We start education campaigns. We organise political appeals. We raise money for charities. Perhaps Mary raised Jesus to be a man of peace, upending systems of violence, so that those Bethlehem children may not have 'died in vain'. Was this his family's awakening moment to the reality of evil and violence in the religious and political systems? Jesus then spent his whole adult ministry challenging those. And maybe it was because his family taught him: *you will be One so that these children did not die in vain.* Was Jesus' life washed with Rachel's tears?

Some years ago I wrote an essay on the civil war in Lebanon, which even on the scale of civil wars is one of the most convoluted and brutal wars I have ever researched. I was particularly looking at the experience of women in that war, from the 1970s to the 1990s, and I interview the mother of a school friend of mine who fled to Australia in the 1980s. This beautiful woman - Epsibah - was a kindergarten teacher. On a kindergarten excursion she was in the first bus, and she looked out the back window and saw the second bus explode. And she said: we are leaving. She sat on her couch in her house in Morley and wept, and wept, and wept, and she said: 'you cannot wash blood with blood'. So I called that essay 'Washing blood with tears'. Jesus never takes revenge for these children. Never. He lives out an alternate response to violence.

**For those not up for a sermon today: How can you choose to wash blood with tears, rather than with more blood; to side with those who mourn without adopting the tactics of those who abuse?**

**The challenge for us is who do we side with?** Who are you in this story? Are you - am I - implicitly part of the system that depends on violence to survive? Herod was characterised by fear, power-lust, lies, manipulation and ultimately violence. And sometimes those things characterise me. We need to be aware of the ways we are in

collusion with Herod, and the ways we take on Herod's characteristics in fighting against him.

I came across a sermon written as a poem, by Jane Redmont, looking at this text. I'll read just a few bits of it, because its long, and beautiful.

She sketches which characters we identify with, then says:

But we don't identify with Herod.  
God forbid!! He's the bad guy.

...

The killings raise the question  
of how to live in this situation of  
violence,  
how not to have our lives distorted.

...

How do we watch out for Herod  
who is real  
and not have the trauma he wreaks  
upon the world  
repeat itself?  
How do we not live  
in such a way that we see him  
everywhere  
even in nights meant to be restful  
even in the face  
of those who wish us well?

What a task.

We have to discern the Herods  
and their tactics  
and speak the truth  
in the face of their lies.

...

How are we distorted by it? How can  
we learn not to be?

...

How do we keep  
and cultivate  
clarity,  
courage,  
compassion  
and peace?

Are we going to live with the tactics  
of Herod?

(She goes on, or are we going to live like Jesus, Mary, the Magi...)

She concludes that we do this by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. Yes. And I would add: and don't forget along the way those who cannot be comforted.

Which Jesus are we fixing our eyes on?

Matthew reminds us: Jesus who is **King**, a different sort of **upside-down King**, the Jewish **Messiah**, come to **redeem our hopeless world in a new way**, to be **one of us, sent and enabled by God**, arriving in a world of **bloodshed and violence, living as a refugee, holding the grief**, and **stirring a response** in every individual he encounters, just by the reality of his being alive.

*(followed by reading 'Home', by Warsun Shire: <http://seekershut.org/blog/2015/09/home-warsun-shire/>)*