

Dear Friends,

Mt 2: 3-8; 12-18

Magi have come to Jerusalem from the east. They are searching for the king of the Jews. They have come to pay homage to him. Word of this has reached King Herod. He is terrified and furious. Terrified, because this child is a threat to him. Furious, because people were meant to bring gifts to him; meant to give all they had and all they were to him; meant to put themselves in his hands, so that he could do with them as he pleased. He therefore decides that the child must be destroyed straight away. His first task is to track him down. He begins his search by gathering the religious leaders. He asks them where the Messiah will be born. They tell him that the prophecies say it will be in Bethlehem.

Herod then has the magi brought to him. He smiles at them. He is all sweetness and light. He makes a show of hearing what they say with interest. But if they take a good look at his face, they may be able to see that although he is smiling and smiling, underneath he is a villain who is filled with terror and fury. He finds out from the magi when it was that the star appeared. This gives him a clue as to when his rival was born. He is narrowing down the potential suspects that need to be removed.

He sends the magi to Bethlehem. He gives them instructions to come back and tell him where he may find the child. He says that he too wants to worship him and offer his life to him. But these are not his real intentions. He intends to have the child killed.

Looking ahead, the magi will find the child but they will be warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. Joseph will also have a dream in which he will be told to get away with Mary and Jesus. The family become refugees and go on one of those dangerous refugee journeys. They make it to Egypt, where mercifully they find a welcome and are given asylum.

Herod realises that the magi are not going to report back to him. He is furious with them. As far as he is concerned, they have tricked him. Although he was actually the one that was trying to trick them. He decides to take terrible and wicked action. He sends his troops to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem who are two years old and under. He wants one child dead. He considers the deaths of many children to be a price worth paying in order to make sure that one is destroyed. To him the children are expendable. They are acceptable collateral damage. Bethlehem was a small settlement, a little cluster of houses. One estimate puts the number of children slaughtered at about twenty to thirty.

It is a sickening moment. A moment of horror. It reflects the world as we know it which is filled with threatening horrors just like this. The Christmas story is not sentimental. It takes the realities of the world with full seriousness. In Jesus, God comes amongst us and when God comes amongst us God faces the threats, the darkness, the evil, the horrors that we face. And God, in Jesus will encounter all of

that most fully when Jesus is tortured and then executed on the cross. In this world of horror, we do well to resist evil and struggle for the flourishing of good. We do well to go on praying "Deliver us from evil."

But all that happens later. Let's go back. The magi have left Jerusalem. Ahead of them is the star. The horror will take place in the future. But life does not only serve up horror. It also gives us moments of wonder and joy. That is what the magi are about to experience.

God bless you,

Tony