

**Sermon on Sunday 29 December 2019 at 10am at the  
Eucharist at Holy Trinity**

**Isaiah 63. 7-9**  
**Matthew 2.13-23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

Christmas Day dawned bright and clear. No cloud in a sky of iridescent blue, and purple and gold. Perfect peace and beauty in all creation. What joy to be alive. By Boxing Day all this had changed. It was cold, and dark and wet. Once again the world had become a hard place. How glad we were for the warmth and shelter of our homes, our familiar surroundings. In England's bleak mid winter those moments of beauty and glory are rare and precious. The black clouds quickly darken the sun.

And that's what has happened in our Christmas story. On Wednesday, Christmas Day, we heard in Luke's Gospel of the shepherds hurrying to Bethlehem to find the infant Jesus, and telling his parents of the message of the angels, that Jesus was a Saviour, Jesus was the Messiah. The angels had brought good news of great joy for all the people. And Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Next day, Thursday, Boxing Day, the black clouds darken the sun. Once again an angel speaks, but this time, in Matthew's Gospel, it is to Joseph. No time to ponder or reflect. Joseph must act to protect what is most precious, what has been entrusted by God to his care. He must take his wife and her child, now legally his child as well, and flee into that dark night, flee into Egypt. It is the story of the Exodus put into reverse.

The reason for this flight into a far away and foreign land? The decision of a despotic ruler to murder all the little children of Bethlehem, because the despot feared that amongst those babies was one born to be King. A rival to be exterminated. Like a young rat. We can feel that evil. It is so vivid because it has battered onto innocence and vulnerability itself. The black clouds of evil quickly darken the winter sun.

This massacre wasn't a one-off. Think how St Matthew describes the horror. 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children;' Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved and who is revered as the mother of a nation, died in childbirth and is buried in Ramah on the way to Bethlehem. And Ramah then a village about five miles from Jerusalem, was the assembly point where Rachel's descendents had to gather before the forced march into captivity in Babylon.

And now forgive me if I ask you to think of all those 20<sup>th</sup> century assembly points for the massacre of innocents. The railway station sidings in the cities of Europe with crushed cargos of humanity awaiting transportation to the extermination camps. They are still remembered. In London and Guildford we are accustomed to walking past houses with blue plaques commemorating great writers, musicians and scientists who once lived there. But in Paris the plaques record those who died in the Resistance, and if you wander around the Marais district in eastern Paris you walk past three schools with plaques commemorating the night when all, all the children were taken to the railway station and from there to Auschwitz.

The black clouds dreadfully darken the winter sun.

How amazing that God took the risk of the Incarnation. To be Emmanuel, God-with-us. To be fully God and at the same time to be fully human. To be a baby, so vulnerable that without the nurture of Mary and the protection of Joseph there would have been no chance of God's purpose being fulfilled. To be a baby so powerful that a worldly ruler immediately seeks your death, but at the same time humble; a carpenter's son. How amazing that God took the risk of the Incarnation. To be Emmanuel, God-with-us. And yet, that is what has to be. If Jesus is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be where the pain is. And I believe he is. I believe that is how God sets about liberating his people, and bringing justice to the whole world.

So, if that is how God is with us, then how are we to respond to him? How do we come to him? With faith for certain. But what are the gifts that we bring to him?

If the little children of Bethlehem speak to us with a poignant urgency, if the deported children of the Marais district of Paris speak to us with an uncomprehending question, 'why this cruelty?' if all the suffering children of present day Syria speak to us of their terror and their bewilderment, it is because of their innocence and their suffering in a world disfigured by men and women of experience.

When that experience is born not out of love of God and humanity, but out of love of self, then the innocent are no longer protected, and the innocence in us dies. And both are precious in the sight of God. Not only the innocence of the child, but also the innocence tested in experience.

So what are the gifts that we can bring to God-with-us this Christmas? It is for us to choose. What is there that is most precious in each of us? What is there that is unalloyed with any selfishness? What is there in us of true innocence?

Then, whatever each one of us believe is best in us, let us offer that to God-with-us, Emmanuel, this Christmas, and covenant with God that we shall live in that innocence, and by that innocence, and through that innocence, even in the wealth and in the poverty of our experience. Amen.