

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 8 JANUARY 2012

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Jeremiah 31: 15-17; Matthew 2: 13-23

“The Massacre of the Innocents”



Today's story is one of the “MA” rated stories in the bible we hesitate to put in children's bibles or tell in children's addresses.

Some progressive Christian bible scholars think it would be better if we rid scripture of stories like this because they don't see how these stories help us to become better people and who are in the process of creating a better world, following in the footsteps of the wisdom teacher Jesus of Nazareth.

It's a gruesome tale and I think it is justified to question why Matthew put it into his version of the birth of Jesus and why we should read it in Church.

There is nothing positive in it!

The massacre of the innocents probably never happened. There are no historical records of such an event, and only Matthew includes it in his gospel.

Which makes it highly unlikely this story refers to historical fact. Which then makes the question even more urgent.

Why? Why put this gruesome story in if it is not even true?

Pieter Bruegel the elder, a sixteenth century painter who painted the picture on the front of the order of service may be able to help us understand.

He paints a sixteenth century Flemish village in the snow, with soldiers dressed in sixteenth century European uniform and peasants trying to hold on to their children in sixteenth century European dress, surrounded by sixteenth century Flemish village homes. There is even a sixteenth century Church in the back ground.

Did he not realise the massacre had taken place sixteen centuries beforehand? In a village that would have looked totally different from the one he paints in such beautiful detail? With soldiers and villagers clothed very differently to the people of his day? And certainly not two feet deep in snow?

Of course he did! The thing is Pieter, living in the aftermath of the Reformation, will have had the stories and images of brutality and murder in his own time, or just before it, still very fresh in his own mind and the people he was painting for.

And that's how he paints the story: as the story of his own time, as he and his contemporaries know it to have happened in the low lands of Europe. With the snow two feet deep and the Spanish and German empires ordering the killings.

What happens now, happened then,

what happened then, happens now.

Jesus came into a world like ours and only just escaped the brutality of empire.

Writing down his gospel Matthew does what Pieter Breugel does with his painting. In his image of time he paints an image of all time.

He is not interested in historic truth, in the news that would have made it to the papers of his day; he is interested in the much deeper eternal truth of God with us, in a world where God may seem far off.

In his text he refers to the prophets, who in turn were referring to history going much further back than theirs. All the way back to the beginning of God's journey with their people, to God's promises over the ages, to God's enduring presence with them since the dawn of time.

The three direct quotes and the many allusions in the text remind his readers, remind us, of a history that goes back a long way.

Joseph the dreamer reminds us of another Joseph, also a dreamer, who was also a righteous man, also ending up in Egypt, where he saves God's children from dying in their homeland Israel.

The brutal ruler, the murdering of the infants, bring back memories of another infanticide where one managed to escape to become the saviour of his people. Moses, set afloat amongst the bulrushes, fleeing into the wilderness, but returning to lead his people out of oppression.

The name Nazareth, the title Nazorean, put in to make his readers think of judges like Samson and Gideon, bearing that same title who came to the rescue in Israel's early days.

The words about Rachel weeping in Ramah over her lost children bring back the memories of how Jeremiah saw his people being rounded up to go into exile. And of the promise that immediately precedes and follows this quote in his prophecies.

Perhaps this is a story to tell children after all. A fairytale about a brutal, evil King and a compassionate God who doesn't let go, about the deep dark forest of fear the world often is and the love and dedication of a power that leads out of that forest into another world.

The massacre of the innocents may not be history, but it is.

It is a story experienced again and again, from the days of Joseph who narrowly escapes his jealous brothers, to the days of the paranoid pharaoh who dreads to lose control over his slave population and decides to kill all little boy babies.

From the lamentations of Jeremiah when his people are rounded up for a forced march into exile, to the days of Antiochus Epiphanes, a predecessor of Herod and lover of Greek culture, who commanded that a mother caught circumcising her son be rewarded by a dead baby hung around her neck.

From Herod who received the honorary title "the Great" for all the magnificent building he did in the aftermath of every new killing spree he undertook to the days of Pieter Breugel when many were killed in the name of a religion that preached forgiveness and compassion on both sides.

Just to fill you in where Herod is concerned, and this is historical fact: we know he murdered the

whole Sanhedrin, 37 members strong, when he came to power. Plunged into a deep depression and started building spectacularly beautiful buildings when he came out of it.

He killed three of his sons, plunged into a deep depression and started building some more beautiful buildings when he came out of that one.

He ordered 300 people to be killed just before he died to make sure someone would be mourning in Jerusalem, because he knew full well nobody would be mourning for him.

And those were only the major killings, apparently he did quite a few more, every time followed by depression and more building.

And in our days, from the holocaust to Pol Pot, from Saddam Hussein to Muammar Gaddafi these things still happen. Googling for pictures to put on the front of the order of service this week there were so many horrifying MA+ rated images available taken from very recent and current conflict it made me feel sick.

And that is why this story needs to be told. But not only for that.

If it was only to remind us that this story has happened and is happening in every age, in every culture, at any time, we would probably end up in a deep hole of depression too deep to ever get out of.

What's the use if we know that this is what the world is like, has been like and will be like forever?

"I will call my son out of Egypt" says one prophet. "They shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for the future says the Lord" says the other prophet. "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, because there is reward for your work".

In that long history of tears echoes the promise of hope and return, of life and salvation, of survival against all odds of light and truth, of justice and wholeness.

There is a beautiful rabbinical story about the weeping of Rachel that Matthew quotes from Jeremiah which is worth telling here.

When Jeremiah saw how his people were rounded up in Ramah and taken into exile he called Moses from the grave to bear witness to the suffering of his people.

It broke Moses' heart to see what was happening and he in turn called on the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who responded with indignation. They argue with God, but God is not moved.

Until mother Rachel weeps over her lost children. Only then God is moved, and as one parent to another, God promises: "I will bring them back", and the promise of the new covenant as we find it in Jeremiah 31 ensues.

Matthew's story about the massacre in Bethlehem is not about why God lets these things happen. God doesn't. They just happen.

This story is about a God who is willing to become part of the story, enter into it as the parent of one of those innocents killed, of one of those children Rachel weeps over. About a God who does not give up on humanity even in the face of recalcitrant and sinful rejection, even where those God loves

are met with brutality and murdered. But God responds with a promise and a covenant, time and again.

This story is not about what happened when Jesus was born. This story is about what is happening around us when we are born and how God fits into that. Not on the side of the mighty but on the side of those who suffer at their hands. Working for change.

In the middle of that history, that journey, Matthew places Jesus, his roots stretching back to the time of the Patriarchs, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Rachel, to Moses, to the prophets.

The living image of the God who chooses to be present with his people and lead them through darkness to light. Casting the promise of another future where sadness will turn into joy and mourning into dancing forever ahead of him. Amen.

Image: Breugel, Pieter, *Massacre of the Innocents*. From 'The Royal Collection' ©2008, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.