

PROPHECY IS FULFILLED

Isaiah 63. 7-9
 Hebrews 2. 10-19
 Matthew 2. 13-23

I speak to you in the name of ✝ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen.

If you were at St Stephen's Church on Christmas eve, you will remember that our focus was on the second chapter of St Luke's gospel; and indeed, we might say that Luke's account of our Lord's birth is a universal favourite, because it provides so much detail. Today, however, on the First Sunday of Christmas, our gospel reading is taken from St Matthew; and the text comes after Matthew's description of the Nativity. Some people, when comparing the two gospel accounts of Jesus's birth, have said that Luke reports Christ's birth in terms of its effect on 'peasant people' (shepherds, for example), whereas Matthew presents the birth as a grand event, eliciting responses from 'powerful representatives of the Roman and Jewish worlds' (King Herod, the chief priests and scribes),¹ as well as drawing the attention of 'visitors from other lands' (the wise men).²

That may be true; yet the gospel reading for today makes it clear that, even in Matthew's account, the 'glory days' of gold and frankincense and myrrh (which we will soon re-visit at Epiphany) did not last for long.

If we look closely, we see that our text from Matthew is organised around movements between four geographical places that, taken together, relate what might even be considered as (dare I say it?) a *downward spiral* for our Lord's apparent career and success.

¹ Cf. Mt 2. 3-4.

² Cf. Mt 2. 1-2.

The first place, of course, is Bethlehem. Bethlehem is where Jesus is at the start of the lesson.³ It is the ‘city of David’, a place of great importance in Israel's tradition and God's plan. Even Christ's opponents knew (or learnt) that this was precisely the spot where the Messiah should be born.⁴ But from here, where would the ‘King of the Jews’ go next? to Jerusalem? No, to Egypt.

Egypt,⁵ the second place, was a land with ambiguous connotations. It was, as we know, the place of bondage from which God had to deliver his people in the exodus. But it was also sometimes a place of refuge, as other Old Testament texts suggest.⁶ Matthew tells the story of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt with incredible irony. In the initial exodus story, babies were slaughtered in Egypt by the wicked pharaoh.⁷ Now, righteous Jews like Joseph and Mary must flee to Egypt in order to escape a horrible massacre of infants in their own land.⁸ This flight to Egypt is not a detour without precedent: another Joseph, the patriarch who was also guided by God through dreams, once brought his family here.⁹ And as it turns out, our Lord's sojourn here is a brief one. Soon, the Holy Family is directed back to Israel, where they belong. But alas! Another problem arises, and they end up settling in Galilee.

Galilee,¹⁰ the third place, was commonly known as ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’.¹¹ Though once a part of the northern kingdom of Israel, the land had never really been recovered since its fall to the Assyrians, and it was now widely populated with ‘foreigners’. The Jews in Judea considered Galilean Jews only slightly better than Samaritans. Settling in Galilee was definitely not a wise career move for anyone who wanted credentials as a Messiah.

³ Cf. Mt 2. 1.

⁴ Cf. Mt 2. 3-6.

⁵ Cf. Mt 2. 13-15.

⁶ Cf. 1 Kgs 11. 40; 2 Kgs 25. 6; Jer 43. 1-7.

⁷ Cf. Ex 1. 15-22.

⁸ Cf. Mt 2. 16-18.

⁹ Cf. Gen 37-50.

¹⁰ Cf. Mt 2. 22.

¹¹ Cf. Mt 4. 15.

And the fourth place, Nazareth,¹² was even worse. This little agricultural village, with a population of about five hundred, was so insignificant that at one time, some historians and archaeologists denied that such a place had ever existed. ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ the disciple Nathanael said in another gospel,¹³ and the phrase may even have been a popular proverb of the day. These words described a sentiment that was felt by many.

So what are we to conclude? That Jesus, whose birth started out so promisingly, has faded fast? That his ‘fifteen minutes of fame’ are over? No, we cannot conclude this, because Matthew advises us that everything is transpiring according to God's plan. As the Holy Family moves from place to place, Matthew reminds us that each movement actually fulfils biblical prophecy given long ago. God directs the Holy Family at every juncture.

The move from Bethlehem to Egypt ‘was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet (Hosea), “Out of Egypt I have called my son”.’¹⁴ Meanwhile, back in Bethlehem, where King Herod (and not God, let us be clear) was organising the massacre of infant children, this too had been prophesied by Jeremiah:¹⁵ ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’ And the move from Egypt to Galilee, more precisely to Nazareth, also echoed the voices of the prophets who had predicted, ‘He will be called a Nazorean (or Nazarene).’¹⁶

¹² Cf. Mt 2. 23.

¹³ Cf. Jn 4. 46.

¹⁴ Cf. Hos 11. 1. This text initially referred to God's calling Israel out of Egypt during the time of Moses. But Matthew, inspired by the Holy Spirit, applies it to Jesus. He sees the history of Israel (God's children) as being recapitulated in the life of Christ (God's only Son).

¹⁵ Cf. Jer 31. 15. Ramah, located about five miles north of Jerusalem, was one of the towns through which Jerusalem's people passed on their way to exile in Babylonia. Rachel was Jacob's favourite wife and the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two most prominent and powerful tribes in the northern kingdom. The name is used here to personify that kingdom.

¹⁶ These exact words are not found in the Old Testament and probably refer to several Old Testament pre-figurations and/or predictions that the Messiah would be despised (cf. Ps 22. 6; Isa 53. 3), for in Jesus's day ‘Nazarene’ was virtually a synonym for the ‘despised’. Some hold that in speaking of Jesus as a Nazarene, Matthew is referring primarily to the word ‘branch’, the weak ‘shoot’ of Jesse (Hebrew *neser*) in Isa 11. 1.

What this portion of Matthew's narrative presents is an unexpected turn in the career of our Lord the Messiah, a turn toward lowliness and humility rather than grandeur and greatness. After leading the reader to believe that Jesus would be one before whom kings of the earth would either kneel or tremble,¹⁷ Matthew now reveals that Christ is to be identified with the helpless and vulnerable.

Matthew's trust in the prophetic promises is not mere naiveté: his faith is not simplistic. Matthew's trust in God's providence emerges not from a facile or superficial belief, but from a faith that expects God to reign in a world where the dominance of the powerful seems unchangeable.

Today, as you and I prepare to mark the end of one year and the beginning of another, perhaps this gospel text from Matthew is inviting us to pay attention to the meticulous way in which God guides and provides for us, even when events do not seem to be transpiring as we would wish. As long as we remain with our Lord and walk with him, we may be assured that nothing can happen to us that God has not foreseen, willed and promised beforehand. We can have hope.

Amen.

¹⁷ Cf. Mt 2, 3, 11.