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St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Matthew 2.13-23

I have always believed that it is good to hear about someone and to get an idea about them by reputation – that is from those who know them or knew them! This is some thing like getting a reference!

So it is with the gospels!

It is what the gospel writers say ABOUT Jesus which tells how they knew and understood him.

Today's gospel says some things which are difficult to verify in terms of their historical accuracy but which really paint a very vivid picture of Jesus as Lord and king from his birth.

This story is ONLY in to Matthew's gospel!

The Magi at Jerusalem

We find out first of all the place and the date of Jesus birth

- It was Bethlehem which was the home of David, the greatest of the kings of Israel
- It was the time of King Herod who is cast as a second Pharaoh - a symbol of unbelief and hard-heartedness!

(Although there are problems with the timing of the death of Herod (4BC) and the birth of Jesus.)

The Magi – wise men, magicians, astrologers arrive from the East throwing Jerusalem and Herod into confusion with their enquiry about the birth of the King of the Jews. Herod assembles the Sanhedrin and they ascertain that Bethlehem is the place foretold.

The fact that the Magi ask for “The King of the Jews” indicates that they are Gentiles! Jews would not call themselves “Jews” and they would not look for the “king of the Jews” but the “Messiah” or the “King of Israel”

There was also the suggestion of a star indicating a King in the book of Numbers, and Venus Jupiter and Saturn had crossed paths in 7BC. Was Matthew remembering things but not quite in historical sequence?

Then we have the Magi at Bethlehem

After they have assured Herod that they will let him know about this child king on their return. Why Herod would want to also worship him is at present unclear but the next paragraph makes it very plain. For now the Magi present their gifts (and notice that the number of wise men is not stated only the number of the gifts!)

The gifts of Gold Frankincense and Myrrh are gifts associated with a king. The other suggestion is that they are elements used in their magic arts which are surrendered to the lordship of Christ. A surrender which ends their practices and acknowledges the completeness of the Lordship of Christ over all that has gone before.

The flight into Egypt

Now we hear why the Magi were been warned not to return to Herod!

An angelic messenger warns that Herod is planning to kill the new king and so Joseph must escape with Mary and the child to Egypt. Matthew sees this as a repetition of the events which happened before the Exodus. Once more a king is killing Jewish children, but just as Moses was hidden and saved so now Jesus will be saved by this escape. God's purpose will be fulfilled because he will call his son out of Egypt.

The death of the children at Bethlehem

And so Herod proves that he is very much like the ancient Pharaoh as he kills those who might pose a risk to his precious power. (Recall it was Pharaoh's killing of Hebrew children which caused Moses to be hidden in the bulrushes.) The angel's warning is now fulfilled!

Matthew also recalls the prophecy of Jeremiah who sees Rachel mother of Joseph and Benjamin weeping over her children (those taken into captivity in Babylon in 587BC) The connection with Bethlehem was that Rachel's grave was believed to be there!

Return to Israel and settlement at Nazareth

With the death of Pharaoh, Moses could return to Egypt. So now, with the death of Herod, Jesus and his family can return to Israel – not to Judea – because one of Herod's sons is king - but to Nazareth in Galilee and once again prophecy is fulfilled!

Whereas Luke's gospel presents Mary and Joseph as living in Nazareth and only visiting Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus, Matthew refers to an obscure scriptural reference possibly based on Isaiah 11 v.1 where the Messiah of David's line is described as "a shoot from the stump of Jesse". The Hebrew for the word "shoot" is "neser" and so he will be a "Nazorean" from the town of Nazareth. Yet again Matthew sees the movements of the Holy Family as the fulfilment of scripture!

In this simple story of Jesus life as a refugee we find many many images of Jesus as the fulfiller of his peoples past are given and much deeper understanding of how Matthew understood who Jesus was.

- In the book Exodus the king of Egypt is the enemy of Israel. Here, a king of Jerusalem is the enemy
- In Exodus, Moses flees for safety out of Egypt and returns. Here, Jesus is taken into Egypt for safety and returns.
- In the Old Testament, Egypt and Pharaoh are symbols of unbelief and hardness of heart. Here, Jerusalem and Herod fulfil this role.

But he is also the king and Lord of the Nations as indicated by the surrender of the Magi and their gifts.

Today is titled Holy Family Sunday but as we have seen the story of the Holy Family is not simply a story about Mary, Joseph and Jesus being the ideal family – it is much more!

It would be easy also to speak out against the evils of modern society and uphold the "traditional" family as a model!

Such an approach only makes those in non-traditional families feel less valued.

Just how do we take the ethic of Biblical times and make it relevant to modern society? Can we translate the nature of the four-generation family into a society so structured that we cannot return to the models of the past?

As we think about the nature of The Holy Family we must recognize what is real in family life around us! Neither do we live in an ideal world!

As such the Christian family offers the flesh and blood reality of an extended family and I would hope that we can all find friendship comfort and nurture in its midst!