

## Jesus, Refugees, and a Retelling of the Christmas Narrative

When you ask people to retell the Christmas story, no matter which people you do this with, you usually get the more commonly known elements: the inn and its lack of room, angels, shepherds, wise men and a brilliant star.

Most people understandably neglect the unhappy and problematic parts of the Christmas story. But it is full of challenges. Having to be on the road pregnant with a child to be born any day is not a walk in a rose garden. Being homeless in the cold of the night is not nice and easy either. Being visited by the outcasts of that time, the shepherds, wasn't much fun either. So, even the so-called easy parts of the Christmas story, are challenges to people then and now.

Of course, there are the kings, and their visit with baby Jesus, but even their story is politically challenging and asks for some discernment in responding to or ignoring a despot king. It is this king who initiated the murder of the children in Bethlehem, - a genocide we would call it today – it is the despotism and dictatorship in the story that we do not really talk about at Christmas.

We seem to have a collective desire to minimize atrocity. We make an unsound division between the Bible stories and the ones we read in the newspapers, because otherwise we would see the closeness of the infanticide in Bethlehem and the more than 1 million Syrian child refugees fleeing from war and killing in their home country.

It is perhaps easier and safer to avoid drawing a direct connection between one of the most celebrated biblical narratives to today's realities, but I think we ought to do it...

Another of those challenging and highly political Christmas story is that of Jesus and his family's journey to Egypt. Matthew 2:13-15:

**When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."**

**So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."**

From an exegetical and historical point of view this may never have happened the way we just read it. But that is not the question. The important thing to ask here is why did Matthew have an interest in describing Jesus and his parents as refugees? People on the run? People without a home? People exposed to the mercy of strangers in a strange land? And why let them live through such danger and hardship? What was Matthew trying to say to the world?

Let's take the story as we find it in our Bible and discover how it gives us food for thought, especially for our thoughts this Christmas.

Let us try to ask the right questions and draw some unusual conclusions.

Let us be willing to be both: surprised and challenged by what we find...

And let us not be scared of the many unclear points in our story.

Let us begin with a first question...

How long did the “holy family” stay in Egypt? The Bible is unclear but it is safe to assume that the first few years of Jesus’ life were spent in Africa.

Where did they go when they arrived in Egypt? The text is unclear but there was a sizable Jewish immigrant population in Alexandria so perhaps they relocated to northern Egypt. How did Joseph and Mary feed Jesus and recreate their home in a new country? Again, the text is unclear but two assumptions are probable. First, there were surely individuals who helped them along the way and so entertained unaware the Son of God. Second, it is possible that Joseph and Mary used the gifts from the wise men to help them in this difficult process.

What is clear is that the holy family had to flee for their lives from a deranged governmental system and they found safety and security in the arms of Africa.

It is not possible to know the kinds of interactions, if any, Jesus had with people around him while an infant in Egypt. But it is reasonable to assume that Alexandria was filled with business interactions and cultural exchanges between the immigrant Jewish population, local Egyptians, people from the broader Roman world and Sub-Saharan Africans navigating the Nile, the life blood of the region. Certainly this impacted the development of Joseph and Mary who may have later recounted to Jesus how they were saved and lived at that time. We cannot know the influence of Africa on Joseph, Mary and Jesus but it is reasonable to assume that it significantly impacted this family.

Moreover, part of the reason why this text is compelling is because it so clearly states that Jesus was at one point a refugee. At Christmas we celebrate many titles for Jesus – Messiah, Immanuel, Christ, Prince of Peace, Son of God – and these are all powerful and true names. But Jesus is also the refugee, the one forced to flee his home, the politically betrayed and abandoned one, scared and fleeing in the night, nervous at the border, wondering how life will go on. Jesus, Joseph and Mary were all refugees.

We do not often celebrate Jesus the refugee. What would it mean this Christmas for churches to affirm that Jesus was a refugee protected by Africa?

Reflecting on this passage the Africa Bible Commentary notes:

The fact that Jesus was a refugee on African soil should teach us many lessons. God was not ashamed to let his son become a refugee. By sharing the plight of stateless refugees, Jesus honoured all those who suffer homelessness on account of war, famine, persecution or some other disaster. There are millions of refugees on the African continent and many of them have a terrible life... The sad thing is that far too many Christians are either unconcerned or believe the lie that every refugee is a troublemaker. Yet the Bible is full of men and women who knew what it meant to be refugee.

Jesus as refugee is good news to many this Christmas season. We can turn to those experiencing true difficulty and say, “God has not abandoned you.” Jesus is one who understands as one without home, without wealth, at one point even without a country. The Gospel is good news to the broken and the suffering in this world.

Jesus as refugee is also a challenge to Christians this Christmas season. If Jesus was a refugee today would the church welcome him or miss him altogether? If Jesus was a

refugee, might we find the Spirit of God still at work in refugees today? If Jesus was a refugee, might we also have a responsibility to help others who find themselves in such a situation?

If the church is unwilling to help refugees then who will?

If the church is unwilling to step into this difficult kind of situation and offer the love of Jesus then where is the hope of the Christmas season?

We must be willing to step into the most difficult, most broken, most challenging spaces because the light of Jesus shines brightest in the darkest of contexts.

We must be aware of this biblical mandate...

According to recent statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees there are approximately 60 million refugees worldwide today.

Jesus was a refugee.

41% of the refugees are children.

Jesus was a refugee child.

Each Christmas we worship, though we may not always state it clearly, the refugee Jesus. This season let us also pray, minister and befriend those with whom Jesus specifically identified: refugees.

### **Activity**

*People stand up and place pieces of luggage through the aisle towards the altar and the Xmas tree.*

### **Candles**

God looks different from the dusty roads of Galilee than from the safety of the temple in Jerusalem. Today God looks different from the roadsides and ditches of the Balkan countries than from the offices and headquarters of the rich and the powerful.

God's people have always been on the road.

People are always on the road.

Some travel for pleasure, others travel for work or education, and many travel to find a new job and a better life.

And even those who don't physically travel far are somehow always on the move in our modern world...

Life is a journey on many different roads. Sometimes it is a joy, always an adventure, often a burden, lives on the road can be at risk, many don't survive...

The pieces of luggage here in the church stand for people's journeys – journeys with much or little luggage, journeys with a bundle only, or those with two suitcases and a book case...

We would like to offer all of us a moment of remembering life journeys – the fun ones and the dangerous ones, and while we do that in silence some of you are invited to take one of these small candles on the altar, light it there, and place it near one of the various pieces of luggage. Let us set a sign, a prayerful sign that our thoughts and prayers are with the people on the move... - on the run... - on the journey, because it is God himself who is in there with all of them...

*Lighting a candle at each piece of luggage*

### **Pastoral Prayer**