

# **MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH**

*(Isaiah 63.7-9 and Matthew 2.13-23)*

The New Year can be a time of looking back and looking forward.

As we have started this year of 2020 - a new decade - some people have been looking back at the decade that has just passed.

It will have brought different memories and highlights for all of us but for most of us there will be "matters of life and death" - memories of new life, spiritual growth as believers and new people, engagements and weddings and perhaps births of children or grandchildren in our families; but and also deaths of loved ones too.

As we grow older, we may be going to more funerals than weddings or christenings and as we look to the decade ahead, we may have concerns about our own health or the health of loved ones. There may be one particular "matter of life and death" that stands out for us e.g. illness/accident but also new understanding of our faith and going on with Him.

It is important that we keep these matters of life and death in God's perspective; at Christmas time we particularly think of Jesus coming into the world as a baby and growing to become the man who is our Saviour. Great words in Christmas hymns and Bible readings; "the word became flesh and dwelt among us." As Christians we can be sure of the promises of God when Jesus spoke about eternal life for all who trust in Him as our Saviour.

So New Year, as well as being a time of looking back and looking forward, is a time for trusting in our Lord for the future as well as being thankful for the past.

In our Bible readings today, we heard words from the prophet Isaiah – the last of a series from that prophet that have been read in this church over recent weeks. These verses remind us of God's kindness and compassion for his people but also;

*In all their distress he too was distressed,  
and the angel of his presence saved them.*

Words that were relevant and had been fulfilled in Old Testament times particular at the time of the exodus from Egypt. Words that gave assurance that God had been with his people and the passage from Isaiah continued:

*In his love and mercy, he redeemed them;  
he lifted them up and carried them  
all the days of old.*

So although those words were fulfilled in Old Testament they were also prophetic for to Jesus' early years.

In our second Bible reading from Matthews Gospel we heard how Jesus as a young child became a refugee and babies were massacred in Bethlehem. It is the grim part of the Christmas story.

I particularly associate it with a schools' Christmas service that I went to some 25 years ago when one of our children was of primary school age. The passage was expanded on with full gory details by the preacher – the parents looked shocked and embarrassed but the children loved it and accepted the message that death and disaster do happen in our world and we must not pretend that they do not - even at Christmas time but continue to trust in God.

As we look at the passage in Matthew chapter 2 we see Joseph as a man who was *in tune with God* and we can learn from his example.

Joseph was open to God speaking to him in dreams and we read today that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph.

On this occasion Joseph was obedient and understood the Urgency of obedience- it was indeed "a matter of life and death" he got up and went in the night, fled to Egypt - a considerable journey to undertake with a wife and a young child. There would have been no public transport (unlike the Magi they would not have been able to travel "camel class"- *hold up Christmas card*) and a long journey to undertake on foot or possibly with a donkey- around 200-300 miles depending on exactly where they went to in Egypt.

How does that compare with us? We carefully weigh matters up before making life changes and often that is entirely the right thing to do. However, there are times when we could and should be prepared to act more quickly in line with the Holy Spirit's leading. That is true for us as individuals and as a church.

The late Rev David Watson, a great 20<sup>th</sup> Century evangelist who was based in York used to like to quote the parody of the famous Christian hymn Onward Christian Soldiers. "Like a mighty tortoise moves the Church of God – surely we are treading where we always trod."

May that not be true for us or our church in the decade to come!

Tragically many people in the world today do have to move quickly from danger. On TV we have seen people fleeing bush fires in Australia.

Many refugees around the world -according to the UN, 70.8 million displaced people (that is more than the total population of the UK) - many have to make the hard decision to leave most of their possessions and leave quickly for safety. They need wisdom and they need God's guidance.

41.3 million internally displaced and 25.9 million refugees in other countries and 3.5 million asylum seekers. 80% refugees live in neighboring countries.

Jesus identified with refugees and displaced people; he became a refugee himself, not the first time that the people of God had gone for sanctuary in Egypt.

This is a great encouragement to Christian refugees around the world knowing that Jesus too was a refugee as a child.

What does that say to us today? Most of us have never been refugees and trust we never will be. A challenge to pray for those who are refugees and any support that we can practically give them either through aid organizations or charities working with asylum seekers in this country. A local example is the Mary Thompson Fund that responds to the critical and emergency needs of asylum seekers or settled refugees in the Tees Valley.

In the middle of our Gospel reading - tragic account of the massacre of the boys of Bethlehem - comparison with killing of the Israeli boys in Egypt at the time of Moses being rescued from the bulrushes.

This was also a fulfillment of a prophecy from Jeremiah:

*'A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.*

As a recently retired doctor I am reminded of the extreme distress of parents when their child has died in hospital, thankfully relatively rare in Western countries but still common in developing ones.

A reminder to us support and pray for those who have lost loved ones particularly when death comes suddenly or violently and the families are not prepared.

Likewise today, Christians continue to be persecuted, tortured and murdered for their faith.

Particularly parts of Africa such as Northern Nigeria and a number of countries in the Middle East where there are reports of great brutality. North Korea is highlighted as one of the worst countries for persecution of believers. Persecution can take many forms- sometimes more subtle e.g. when Christians cannot get work or housing.

Release International has urged the Christian community to pray for those facing persecution and engage with the issue: "Jesus told his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane 'will you just watch and pray with me.' They were not able to do it. But I think that call still goes out to us today. Will you watch, will you pray, will you get involved?"

How can we do that? Prayer material is produced by Christian organizations such as Barnabas Fund or Release International that have a heart for the persecuted and most vulnerable around the world.

Jesus was taken to safety in Egypt - but only for a time. Again, Joseph was spoken to in a dream and told to return to Israel. We read many times in Matthew's Gospel how prophecies were fulfilled.

Again, there was uncertainty. We read that Joseph was afraid as Herod's son was in power and he was warned to go to Galilee and the back water of Nazareth. God could have told Joseph in Egypt to go directly to Nazareth but he did not do so – an illustration to us that God guides one step at a time and to remain close to God to know His guidance.

We may have questions about why things had to be this way for Jesus and why were the children killed.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says:

*He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

We may not be able to “fathom” what God does or allows to happen when we consider “matters of life and death.”

But at the start of this new year and new decade let us move forward positively trusting in the Lord for matters of life and death; being thankful people and prayerful people.

At the start of this year, let us pray for ourselves that we might recommit ourselves to Jesus Christ as our Saviour and be open to the leading of his Holy Spirit.

Let us pray and support others as they face matters of life and death too.