



Kirkcaldy and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André J Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 2: 13-23

Background to the reading

May I take you on this Sunday morning to the stark reality of Joseph and Mary's journey to Egypt.

The journey to Egypt was, to say it in the nicest possible way, a nightmare which I as a parent do not wish anyone to have. Let me explain:

Joseph and Mary and a very wee Jesus left in the night, not to alarm the soldiers of Herod the Great. And they could not travel through Jerusalem. So they had to take the long and difficult route southward to Hebron and then to Egypt. We do not know where they went to. But we do know that a very large Jewish community lived in Egypt in this period. Perhaps one-third of Alexandria, located in northern Egypt, was Jewish; with a population estimated at about one million, it was one of the empire's largest cities. Wherever they travelled to, it must have been at least 200 miles. Now picture this: you travel all day long either on a donkey or on your feet, in the heat of the day, resting next to the road at night, a lack of water; and the fear and threat of Herod with a wee baby!

Why Egypt? Well it was a safe place where Herod had no power or jurisdiction. In the past it had served as a place of refuge to many Israelites. Matthew also portrays Jesus in a striking resemblance to Moses and what happened in Egypt a long time ago. Jesus as the second Moses goes back to Egypt so that the prophecy of Hosea chapter 11 could be fulfilled "Out of Egypt I called my son." He will also just like Moses come out of Egypt and fulfill the will of God.

Because the only natural route by which the Magi could have returned was through Jerusalem, Herod knew that the Magi had purposely avoided returning to him. He then ordered all the male babies under two years to be killed in Bethlehem. He was known for acts like the massacre described here. He was responsible for a lot of deaths to his own family members. He was doing the same thing as the Pharaoh did a long time ago. Just like Moses, Jesus escaped with his life. Jewish people saw infanticide (killing babies) as a hideous, pagan act; normally applied by the Romans to deformed babies, it had also been used to control oppressed populations.

Matthew then quotes Jeremiah 31:15 which refers to the figurative weeping of Rachel, who was buried in Bethlehem. Jeremiah said she mourned for her descendants carried off into captivity during the Babylonian exile. Like righteous Jeremiah, Jesus was carried off to Egypt, but Rachel had cause to mourn anew at Herod's murder of her people.

Then when Herod died Joseph was told in a dream to return to Israel which he did. Again there is a striking resemblance between Moses and Jesus because Moses was also told in Midian to return to Egypt because the people who sought his life are now dead. When Joseph heard that Herod's son Archelaus were reigning in Judea, he changed plans and settled in Galilee. Archelaus, one of Herod's surviving sons, exhibited his father's worst flaws and was also a bad ruler. That his mother was a Samaritan surely also failed to commend him to his Jewish subjects. His rule was unstable, and the Romans ultimately deposed him and banished him to Gaul (France).

Archaeological evidence in the region of Nazareth indicates that many people had moved there from Judea, from the area near Bethlehem. Joseph may have had friends or relatives in Nazareth. Nazareth was on a major road from the coast to Syria.

No single text in the Old Testament bears witness to Matthew's citation in verse 23. But ancient authors sometimes blended texts together, and both Jews and Greeks used plays on words to make points in argumentation. Matthew may have been quoted from a source unknown to us today.

Sermon

The text for the sermon is verse 13: "When they – the magi - 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."

We are not sure how they travelled – whether on foot or by donkey or horse; but the trip probably took them at least 10 days to complete. We don't know if they travelled alone or hitched up with a caravan. However they went they faced the danger of robbers; the heat of the desert day; the cold of the desert night; sand storms; a lack of water; the fear and threat of Herod; and the needs of a wee baby.

Have you ever travelled with babies? If not let me tell you what it is like. You start off maybe with them sleeping in the back, with you and your wife whispering and not making any sound at all. But oh dear then they awake and the nightmare begins. First they are grumpy because they just awoke and moan. Then they get tired again and start crying.

Then when you give them something to eat - you, the car and the baby are in a terrible mess. Travelling with babies is not very comfortable or easy.

And just like Joseph and Mary travelling with wee Jesus we also journey daily with our Lord and saviour. And to say it in the nicest possible way: most of the times it is a struggle too just like it is travelling with children! Why? Because we are humans, corrupt sinners who always make the wrong choices, who always fail to persevere, who always doubt, and yes who almost always rebels against God and his decisions.

On the brink of this New Year we have to prepare ourselves for our journey in faith. We need to make sure we are well prepared for all the challenges that we will have to face in 2011. We must think of ourselves as vehicles in the hands of God. We need to make sure our feet and hands – our tyres are ready for the steep hills and the deep valleys and the slippery icy roads which we will encounter. Our hands need to be open, helping those in need, protecting the vulnerable.

Our windscreens that are our outlook in life - need to be clean and welcoming. We must ensure that we consult our SATNAV that is our Bibles as many times as we possibly can. And we need to stop every week on a Sunday at the services in order for us to refuel and rest in the presence of God, and to meet up with other travellers that are also tired, weary, sick and lonely just like us. It is so true that someone once said: "I moaned because I wanted new shoes, but then I saw someone with no legs at all, and my moaning stopped at once!"

But also we need to take hold of God's hand and journey with him, trusting him as we go through the deep valleys, up steep hills and dangerous mountain passes of this world.

If you are sitting here this morning and you are scared to travel anew with God because of a previous "accident" – remember that God is merciful and loving, always ready to help you. If you are feeling utterly alone with no help in sight, God is here through his Holy Spirit – close your eyes and just say: Lord, help!

If you are here this morning and you feel worried because all your plans in 2010 did not realize, trust God anew and know He knows best. There must have been a reason why your plans did not work out the way you planned.

May we – just as we are - weary, worried, scared, excited, all experience the presence of God's Holy Spirit as we start off this week journeying in faith towards the future full of hope and love!

Amen