

3 JANUARY 2016

READING: Matthew 2:19-23

REFLECTION

My reflection will focus on verses 22b and 23:

“Having been warned in a dream, Joseph withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.”

In our reading it seems as if the Lord spoke to Joseph twice in a dream, first to tell him to return to Israel and then secondly to warn him not to go to Judea but to Nazareth in Galilee because Archelaus was the ruler. Archelaus inherited from his father king Herod the great, a third part of his kingdom namely Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, and hence was also called “king”.

On the death of his Father, Archelaus at first appeared to be good and accommodating to the Jews, but in a short time his true nature was revealed when he slayed 3,000 Jews during an uprising at the Passover season. His rule, like his father’s was also marked by numerous building projects.

Nazareth is a small village in the Roman province of Galilee about 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee and 20 miles east of the Mediterranean Sea. Nazareth is not mentioned in the OT, the Apocrypha, intertestamental Jewish writings, or the histories of Josephus. Trade routes and roads passed near Nazareth, but the village itself was not on any main road.

After all the excitement of Jesus’ birth, all the attention of angels, shepherds and wise men, then the scary flight to Egypt it must have felt to Joseph and Mary that finally they could settle somewhere safe in peace. But I do not think either Mary or Joseph knew what Jesus’ life would really be like, that their son would be a traveller from one place to the next always engaged in some form of conflict with the powers to be.

And just as Mary and Joseph settled down to “normal” life after their ordeal in Bethlehem and Egypt, we find ourselves almost in the same

position.

Christmas is over. All the celebrations around a Christmas tree have died down. New Year celebrations are over. The world has gone quiet. We have to face yet another year with uncertainty not knowing what lies ahead of us all. We have to face yet again all our troubles, challenges and worries. We have to face again the realities that life brings such as hardship, debt, brokenness and bereavement. Yes we are all back in the proverbial "Nazareth".

Where do we go from here? Back to Nazareth? Back to life as it was before Christmas? Jesus changed the lives of JOSEPH AND MARY forever. Things would never be the same for them or all the followers of Jesus who have decided to follow HIM.

The same is true of you and me. We just cannot be back to the proverbial Nazareth as if nothing has happened. Jesus brought to us the light, peace and love of God. Through His life, obedience and service, He showed the world God's love for all people. He was the light of the world and made you and me light bearers everywhere we go. Through His suffering on the cross, He took all our sins upon Himself. Through His resurrection, He gave us the living hope of a new future.

So although the Christmas music has faded away in our Churches, cars, houses and shopping centres, we still have our faith in Jesus Christ. Although the lights on our Christmas trees have been packed away, you and I are still the light to the world. Although all the gifts have disappeared under our Christmas trees, you and I still serve the biggest gift God has ever given the world. Although everything is back to "normal" we still have the hope of inheriting the eternal kingdom.

On Boxing Day we had a lovely post-Christmas dinner with friends. The table was set nicely, and one of the guys lifted up his dessert spoon and said: I love the sight of a dessert spoon, because to me that is a sign of hope, a promise that something sweet is soon to come.

And I think that with those words he gave all of us the recipe for a successful new year – a spoonful of hope stirred into a life of faith, sprinkled with love...

Just as your dessert spoon signals something good to come, although you don't know what it is going to be, so is the birth of Jesus, too, a signal of hope of a better life with God.

We might not know what lies ahead of us. Going back to normal might imply for some going back to empty days, lonely nights, worries without cease, ill health, sadness... But what we do know is that if God is on this journey with us, we'll end up where we are supposed to be, we'll have the strength to face adversities, and the courage to make the most of every day.

So let's be thankful for the times the road is smooth and we can celebrate and laugh and love and enjoy; and let's be hopeful when the road is rough – because Jesus was born, and that was just the beginning of the story.

So when the plate of life seems to be filled with nothing but Brussels sprouts, just focus on that dessert spoon... On the promise that in God there is a hope that transcends everything.

Let us do what Joseph did – listen to God and do what He says. Then the rest will follow naturally because God is in charge.

So although it is “back to Nazareth” we can lift up our heads and face the challenges that this new year will bring. We can cry with hope, because as in the past God will not let go of you and me, His love will remain with us, whether we are in Bethlehem, East Calder, Kirknewton, Scotland or Nazareth. He is Immanuel, God with us!

Amen