

Sermon Given by

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At the 9am service on 27th December 2009

Matthew 2:13-23 - "History is Bunk... or is it?"

It was back in July 1919, during a lawsuit against the Chicago Tribune, that the American car manufacturer, Henry Ford came up with his one famous saying: History is Bunk. 'The most accurate chart of the meaning of history, he further explained, is the set of tracks made by a drunken fly, with feet wet with ink, staggering across a piece of paper: they lead nowhere and reflect no pattern of meaning.'

Perhaps you think that the little snippet of history we read from Matthew 2:13-23 proves Henry Ford's point all too well; another tragic, pointless and brutal episode in a meaningless whole.

Make no mistake, it **is** history: everything we read here fits what we know of the first century world perfectly: as Herod got older he grew increasingly paranoid about the security of his throne. He reacted with ruthless violence to every threat, real or imagined. So he killed his wife, Mariamne, 2 brothers in law, two sons. Then a few years after this incident, five days before his own death he ordered the arrest of a number of ordinary citizens, commanding that they be killed on the day of his death to boost the mourning in his kingdom to an appropriate level.

If the slaughter of the innocents goes unrecorded by secular historians that's no great surprise: Bethlehem's population was around a thousand, so the number of male babies under two years old was probably less than twenty: hardly worth a mention on Herod's known criminal record.

He was succeeded in the south by one of his sons, Archelaus, who began his reign with purge of over a thousand political opponents; small wonder Joseph decided it would be smart to head north to Nazareth with his young family on returning from Egypt.

So the history of the story fits with the world then... and it fits with the world today as well - when we hear the statistics of **our** brutality: how many were killed in war during the last century? 191 million. Or how many are currently displaced from home as refugees: maybe around 15 million – although how do you count that?

And for that reason maybe the account, unpleasant as it is, provides some welcome relief from the unreality of so much of our talk and behaviour at Christmas time.

So much of our talk is slightly unreal at Christmas. And maybe that sets up a clash under the surface; because for most of us the world isn't decked in tinsel and Christmas lights. Maybe even Christmas itself is tinged with sadness for some of us here. You've got some sad memories of things that happened at this time of year in the past or a **recent** bereavement means that Christmas will never be the same as it has been. Perhaps it's a comfort to know

that the holy family knows by experience the pain there can be at this time of year and they can identify with you.

This is a snapshot of just the world we know: it's real history... But we must part company with Henry Ford, because there is nothing meaningless about it. Just listen to one clear note that rings out three times in our verses.

Look please at verse 15: ***“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”***

And again in verse 17: ***“Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘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.’”***

Then glance on to the last verse of the chapter, verse 23: ***“... and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: He will be called a Nazarene.”***

They're words which introduce us to one of two divine figures: first the Ruler, God himself... Because that repeated emphasis on God fulfilling his predictions tells us that there is an overshadowing purpose behind history – or rather a **person** who rules it, predicting what will happen and bringing to pass his plan.

It's sometimes been suggested that Matthew made up these stories of Jesus' infancy in order to **create** fulfilments for various Old Testament prophecies, inventing imaginary incidents to fit what had been predicted years earlier.

But these prophecies are pretty obscure. In fact the final one doesn't appear as a single Old Testament prophecy at all. They don't leap out of the text demanding messianic fulfilment.

So it's hard to see how anyone in their right mind would introduce them into an account of Jesus' origin – unless the facts themselves sent people back into their Scriptures to look for certain unexpected aspects of Jesus' background.

So Matthew ponders the refugee journey in verses 14 and 15: ***‘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 he realised that the prophet Hosea had written something: ***‘And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘out of Egypt I called my son’.*** This escape from Herod **wasn't** random after all: it was God working out his plan for his people, doing a repeat of something he'd done before.

You get the same thing in verses 16-18: ***‘When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi, Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning’.***

When Matthew ponders Herod's appalling command and the despairing cries of the parents of Bethlehem as their little ones are slaughtered, he's led to the prophet Jeremiah as he spoke about an earlier time. Wailing had been heard in the same area of Ramah years before when it was used as a Prisoner of War camp by the Babylonians.

Even the family's eventual residence in a despised northern town chimes in with another Old Testament note: verse 23 reports they go and live in Nazareth – quote: **'so was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: he will be called a Nazarene'**.

What Matthew is saying is that sometimes the circumstances of the early life of Jesus were so appropriate that these references must have been present in God's mind as he spoke through the various prophets, even if not in the human author's awareness.

God's plan had already been fixed, and it's no surprise that after the event people saw that God had put these hints of subsequent history in the Jewish Scriptures long before.

He is the Great Ruler of world History; and just as the Gulf Stream flows regardless of all the many chaotic conflicting currents of the Atlantic Ocean. There is a gulf stream in the chaos of history. In God's plan, the Jewish nation and their Scriptures are the big current of history – in a flow that leads directly to Jesus.

So let's consider our second divine figure; not the Ruler this time, but the Rescuer, Jesus. Because it's one thing for us to take comfort that there is someone in control of human history, but we need to be clear that right at the centre of God's plan is Jesus, God's rescuer...

Matthew sees Jesus as the focus of the Old Testament Scriptures he's quoting... So that quotation **'Out of Egypt I called my son'** is referring initially to the experience of Israel. Remember they'd been slaves in Egypt, the ruler there had tried to kill off the young male children too but God had brought his people out safely.

But by applying that prophecy to Jesus, Matthew is hinting that in fact Jesus is going to succeed where Israel had in the end failed. Not Israel, but Jesus is the one through whom God's blessing will reach the world.

The quotation from Jeremiah is similar, though it's less obvious. It's rather like sucking a sweet which changes flavour as you roll it round in your mouth. When a New Testament writer quoted an Old Testament passage we need to bear in mind that they didn't have chapters and verses to refer to: those divisions were an idea of an Archbishop of Canterbury in the 11th Century. So when a New Testament writer wanted to refer to an Old Testament passage, they couldn't provide a chapter and a verse. Instead they quoted from a passage, but not necessarily the whole passage. And that worked well because their original hearers knew the surrounding context well.

But if we suck on these words from Jeremiah in context we'll get a different, richer flavour from them. We have weeping and mourning to begin with, but Jeremiah 31 goes on to tell of a wonderful new beginning. There is a movement from the tears of Rachel turning in her grave to mourn the death of her descendants to the joy a new covenant, where God's laws

are written on human hearts and where human sins are forgiven and forgotten. 'And', says Matthew, 'in Jesus that new day has dawned!'

In fact there's even a hint of **how** in his final Old Testament allusion in verse 23: '**he will be called a Nazarene**'. Those words probably shouldn't be in inverted commas, as our translation has put them, because there is no one Old Testament prophecy that says that. In fact Matthew alerts us to that when he says that the prophets (plural) predicted this.

What did they predict, we ask, which the home in Nazareth ultimately fulfilled? The answer lies not so much in the location of the family home, but in the popular opinion of that location. Nazareth was a despised place: perhaps you remember how in John's Gospel Nathaniel asks: '**Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?**'

If you come from England, the region that gets abuse like that is Essex. And if you're from Essex, the one town that gets singled out is probably Southend. Forgive me for mentioning it if you're from there: I'm sure the reputation is entirely unjustified.

But in Jesus' day to say you were from Galilee in the North was to have others look down on you. And **within** Galilee itself, the place to avoid was Nazareth. Galilee was bad enough, but Nazareth was the lowest of the low. And that despised location was where Jesus ended up living. That, says Matthew, was a pattern predicted throughout the prophets: that God's rescuer would be despised.

If that was the start of his life, then what about the end, strung up on a cross, despised and rejected, a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief. We instinctively feel that that is entirely incongruous: The Messiah – despised: it sounds like a contradiction in terms, two things which don't belong together: Manchester United getting relegated, or the Queen on a camping holiday.

But that despised figure who grew up at Nazareth and then died on the rubbish dump outside Jerusalem is God's appointed rescuer.

What he achieved at the cross was the centre-piece of God's plans for the human race, for your life and mine: he died there taking the punishment our sin deserves so we can be completely forgiven. And it was all predicted countless times so we could not possibly miss his significance.

So what, briefly, of the human responses here to the two divine figures: the Ruler and the Rescuer? There are two human responses.

The **negative** response is typified by Herod... If we had read from the start of the chapter, we would have seen how the visitors from the East had told him that they were searching for the King of the Jews? They probably didn't realise what a hornets nest they were stirring up when they used that particular title, because that was the very label Herod had earned from Mark Anthony and Octavian years earlier, through his bloody political manoeuvring. Now he fears he is going to have to give up the title and move over for some young upstart. And he will stop at nothing to eliminate the threat to his rule.

But the assessment of the Bible is that you and I are actually no different. We resent the fact that Jesus Christ demands centre-stage in our world and in our lives. WE don't want him to take charge; we'd rather be our on bosses. And the footnote to Herod's reign is a warning to us; two little words in verse 19: **Herod died**. The one who had taken others' lives lost his own life. He wasn't ultimately in control at all.

So how much better to respond to God's rule and God's rescue the other way, the **positive** way we see in our verses, as Joseph did. I wonder if you noticed that not only were there three Scriptural predictions in our passage, but Joseph had the benefit of three dreams; in verse 13 – **When 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.**

Then verse 19: **After Herod died, and angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said: 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel'.** And once again at the end of verse 22: **Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee...**

Each time the same response: however inconvenient, without delay Joseph packs up the donkeys and moves on.

Now I don't know how much Joseph had taken on board the full significance of the child that had been born to Mary; but I guess the penny must have dropped after three moves that this baby boy was not your average toddler. He was of huge significance for the world - and Joseph was being called on to drop everything at a moment's notice for him. I don't think we're promised the same kind of guidance for our every move today. But surely that responsiveness to what God says to us – particularly concerning the central place of Jesus in our lives - is a very healthy lesson for us.

Imagine the upheaval each time: Joseph must have dreaded those dreams, don't you think. Each time life was getting settled, they all had to up sticks and move on. It makes me nervous when I consider how settled and comfortable I currently am! To feel in control is not always a good thing. To hand over control to God is what it means to be a Christian. So I want to commend that response of Joseph's to you and to take it to heart myself as I face a new year. History isn't Bunk – God is in control and I must yield him control by re-orienting my life around Jesus Christ, the centre of history, listening to whatever God says in the Bible and doing it.

So I can think of no better way to end this sermon than by quoting those words spoken by King George VI in his Christmas message to a war-stricken England back in 1939: Whatever our uncertainties, let's take these words to heart: 'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: Give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown. And he replied: Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)