

## **The Jesus we never knew x03 (PP1)**

**VPBC Sunday 15 January, 2017.**

### **Weeping, struggle and political backdrop. MATTHEW 2: 13 - 23. (PP2)**

I have shared that one of my hopes for 2017 is that you and I will individually and together get to know Jesus better. That is the real Jesus of history and also personal experience.

This may mean that some of our misunderstandings and misconception about Jesus have to fall away. It will mean we take the New Testament especially the Gospels more seriously and hopefully that we do some new thinking and discovering too. Discovery about Jesus will enable discovery about ourselves also and also cause us to consider the message we are passing on.

**Are we willing to stand behind the real Jesus and are we representing him properly to our children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren?** They and so many others who visit churches may have gathered some very strange ideas about Jesus: after all no one arrives on planet earth with a full understand. If we are asking others to put their trust and base their lives on Jesus then it needs to be the real Jesus.

**Today we continue with the historical accounts of Jesus' birth and the events which surrounded it.** We realise I hope that we need to separate these from many of the images that are pumped out on cards, religious art and films. **Could you recount the main facts quoted about the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem and explain why it happened?** (Journey 690 kilometers, 428 miles)

**The Magi – often called wise men.** These were very distinguished visitors – Gentiles (almost certainly from IRAN – ancient Persia). They came to worship and bring gifts: worship here means to fall down/ kneel/ bow or even prostrate before Jesus. Their visit was certainly weeks, months or even longer after that of the shepherds came to adore and the Magi visited the baby in “the house”.

They visit Jerusalem and made for Herod's palace to seek to find – **the baby born “King of the Jews”**. As we know this was the title Herod – insisted was used of him. We are told that Herod was afraid – by their appearance but also so was Jerusalem's residents. What upset Herod caused Jerusalem to tremble – which the later “slaughter of the innocents” proved was a genuine fear. GTH told us of the murderous practices of Herod the Great. (We don't know if they visited Jerusalem's palace because they looked for a king – or if they were just checking in as visitors to this foreign land?) We know that Herod consulted with the Jewish chief priests (he was an Idumean -Edom) and teachers of the Law who quoted MICAH 5: 2 to say that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem. God uses dreams to warn both Joseph and the Magi (vv 12, 13, 20) to run from Herod and to “stay in Egypt until I tell you to leave”.

Flights into Egypt of Jewish refugees fleeing danger, tyranny and persecution were not that unusual in the centuries before the birth of Jesus. Many Egypt cities e.g. Alexandria had colonies of Jews. “*Out of Egypt I called my son*” – in his reference to Hosea 11: 1 Matthew is making a statement – using a tool to remind Israel that God delivered his people from the slavery of Egypt and inferring Jesus will lead out the new Exodus. The first Exodus was historical but Matthew uses it symbolically and even prophetically.

**The birth of JESUS is not just about domestic bliss: the birth happens within political upheaval and power struggles and oppression. Struggles and even weeping surround it** and this features high in Matthew’s account. This is the world into which Jesus is born. If we understand this, we will see why the desperate hope was for a Messiah’s deliverance from physical oppression.

**Herod the Great** “ruled” from 40BC to his death in 4 BC. (Rule acknowledged by Rome in 37 BC). When he died, his territory was divided into 3. In many ways in his world Herod the Great would have been considered a success as he kept the peace between Jerusalem and Rome. He was, however, an ASSASIN with a reputation of growing paranoia. When he was enthroned he sought to wipe out the last of the Hasmonean Jewish dynasty from which his favorite wife came. When enthroned he began annihilating members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews as we said. His favourite wife Mariamme and her mother, his eldest and 2 other sons. (he had 10 wives and various offspring. He invited one High Priest to come to Jerusalem to swim and he ended up dead after a rather heavy game of “water polo”. (Picture current and soon to be “enthroned” world leaders with their wives and offspring...) At the hour of his death he tried to arrange the slaughter of notable men of Jerusalem by herding them into the Hippodrome in Jerusalem.

His activities are documented extensively by Josephus in 2 significant book scrolls. Herod the Great as well as notable assassinations rebuilt the Great Temple in Jerusalem and founded the city of Caesarea but sinking ships hulls and building upon them. Josephus documents many of his exploits but does NOT document the so-called slaughter of the innocents. WHY? Well many historians including Paul MAIER say its simply a question of scale: Bethlehem was probably populated by about 1,500 people and so between 20 – 30 infant boys were killed which in that world was insignificant. Insignificant to most but not of course to the parents and place.

A “small stirring” which Matthew describes as “***a voice of bitter weeping heard in Ramah***”. Matthew again draws from the history of Israel – *Jeremiah 31: 15* refers to Rachel who died in childbirth and was buried in Ramah (*1 Samuel 10:2*). The rabbis called Rachel “the mother of all Israel for all time” – and here she represents the inconsolable grief of God’s people and indeed all of humanity for all the innocents who have been slaughtered. How many deaths go unrecorded in human press – but not by God? (Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The death of 20 to 30 infant boys may not bear a mention in secular history but to Rachel it is inconsolable weeping and struggle).

**UNICEF** in recent years have reported that 8 million children have been and are at risk in the very region we are talking about. In this world, we share the hope of a Messiah Deliverer...as we “hear Rachel weeping” and the fathers weeping too.

**(PP3) For many in the world as people of God there is great risk and struggle.**

Although the premature death of Christian martyrs may have been exaggerated a modest and more realistic estimate by conservatives is that in 2015 maybe 12,000 were killed (Nigeria Boko Haram large factor) but in 2016 there was a steep decline and maybe 1,207 premature deaths can be documented. But this does not take account of the many more who are squeezed by persecutions to seek to stop them witnessing. (BBC Radio 4 just today – the *Director of “Open Doors”*.)

Some see the “death of the 20 – 30 innocents” in Bethlehem as the first martyrs for Jesus Christ.

Joseph knew it was unsafe to return to the region of Judea since Archelaus was also unpredictable and so went to Galilee where Herod Antipas was a milder, gentler king. NARARETH was small but NOT a backwater. It was near Damascus and one of the greatest caravan routes in the World. All kinds of travellers from many nations travelled it “to the ends of the world”, from Damascus to Egypt and the land bridge into Africa. And again, Matthew makes another declaration: *he shall be called a Nazarene*. Strange statement since “Nazareth” is not mentioned in the OT – but it seems to be a play on Isaiah 11: 1: a shoot will come out from a stump of Jesse, a branch out of its root... possibly because NEZER is the word for branch and so Jesus the promised shoot or branch of Judaism is Jesus from Nazareth?

These are **Matthew’s selection** for his Gospel. (But note in his Gospel from 2: 23 and to 3: 1 is a SILENT 30 YEARS.) All histories are selective.

Matthew highlights the birth accounts and specifically the political and historical context into which Jesus is born. He highlights rejoicing and celebration and singing at Jesus’ birth BUT also the sounds of weeping and struggle.

The lessons to learn and apply? We need to be aware of this and **realistic about the political and historical contexts in which we live and move and witness to Jesus**. Jesus came because the world did need more than a human Saviour. There are few if any golden ages in history for ordinary people. This is because of the human condition and cravings for power that back fire upon all people. SURELY, we should spend more time reflecting on the world we live in and the message of Jesus we are called to witness to. Perhaps this would give us a greater urgency to discuss these things realistically with others?