



Christmas 1, Year A – December 26, 2010

Matthew 2.13-23

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

Listen, listen. Do you hear it? It is the wailing of mothers robbed of their wee ones; it is tears, plenteousness of tears, dropping one by one on the stone pavement, plink, plink, plink; until at last, there is nothing but dry, heaving sobs. It is Rachel weeping for her children.

And just because music can take us more quickly than words to the depths of agony, listen again this time to the exquisite anthem of George Kirbye. Hear the insistence of Rachel's weeping – feel her rocking back and forth and back and forth, as the simple words "*Rachel plorans*" are passed from one side of the choir to the other, and back again. And she would not be consoled (*non consolari*), because her children are no more. And just like that, the music stops. *Quia non sunt*.

[Kirbye's Vox in Rama]

Well, we are a far cry from the radiant boy sound asleep on the hay, evidently without a care in the world, or angelic choruses proclaiming peace on earth and good will towards men, aren't we?!

What on earth is going on here? Surely the Grinch has nothing on the Gospel of Matthew! It is as if we were enticed to lay aside our steely cynicism, to let down our guard, and to surrender to a vision of God embodied in a helpless infant. Scarcely had we begun to tell ourselves, "So, then, *this* is how it is. Gentleness. Vulnerability. Blessed silence. And Light." Scarcely had we determined that perhaps, then, life is *not* our enemy; perhaps we don't need to *fight* our way to finish line; perhaps we are destined to sleep in heavenly peace. When, wham! The little Lord Jesus is run out of town, and in the wake of his escape, every little boy his own age is put to the sword. We could be forgiven for supposing that we have been pawns in one enormous game of bait-and-switch.

There is, you realize, no independent historic record of any such massacre having taken place in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod. Nevertheless, he was a notoriously merciless ruler, exceedingly jealous for his authority; and his son Archelaus, who succeeded him in Judea, was even more so. Archelaus was actually removed from power by the Romans on account of his brutality (which is saying something, since the Romans were hardly averse to gratuitous violence). It is small wonder that in the story, when Joseph returns from Egypt, he decides against returning to the jurisdiction of Archelaus, and moves the family to Nazareth instead. The point is only this, that the story while not independently attested is in keeping with the character of the two Herods, father and son.

So what does it all mean?

We should note first Matthew's "editorial" interest in this story. Matthew is a Jewish Christian writing to a Jewish community, and he is at pains throughout his gospel to present Jesus as the "new Moses." It is Matthew, for example, who has the Sermon on the Mount – where Jesus, like Moses who went up the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments, goes up the mount to teach a new interpretation of the law. (You have heard it said, but I say to you... etc.) Could this, then, account for an infancy story, where Jesus, like Moses, is rescued from a death decreed against infants? Could the journey to Egypt to save his life be a recollection of the

journey of the sons of Jacob (including Joseph) to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan? And could his return, in safety, from Egypt, be twinned in Matthew's mind with the Exodus – that is, Moses' triumphant parting of the Red Sea, and the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt? In other words, this story stands as announcement that from the time of his birth, Jesus was destined by God to be the New Moses, the new harbinger of freedom.

And secondly, this is a story which reminds us of what Thomas Troeger calls our "intransigence to grace." In other words, scarcely does a good thing happen, a new idea take shape in our minds, a new possibility announce itself, than all the powers of negativity, jealousy, fear, or turfdom are mustered in a great act of violent repression. We are expert at shutting down anything which challenges the status quo – especially if the status quo happens to suit us. We circle the wagons, and throw the interloper out. Herod could not bear to share his power, much (as he might have found out) to re-learn the meaning of power, and so he lashed out. It did not matter that he wasn't sure of his target: we come close to understanding the heart of Herod once we recognize that his response was by any measure *overkill*. This is a story which calls us to examine our own hearts with care.

And yes, we *are* a far cry from the radiant boy asleep on the hay, and angelic choruses heralding peace on earth and good will towards men. This story is a far cry from these things, because *we* are a far cry from these things. Jesus is born into the very mess that needs redeeming, and as if to prove the point, that mess rises up in very short order in a paroxysm of evil to preserve itself. But God is not to be deterred in this great experiment we call "Incarnation." Matthew's singular insight is that even in a night of terror, God is there, doing his best to secure our future. It may take 30 years, but one day, the cry of the mothers of Bethlehem ringing in the ears of God, will one day be the cry of God, ringing in the ears of the mothers of Bethlehem.