

Small group gathering 12 December 2019

Gather

Opening prayer

Catching up

- Have there been any people in your family who came to Australia as refugees?
- What sorts of circumstances might make someone flee their country?
- In thinking about Australia's current refugee program, which of the following statements come closest to your personal views and why?
 - The only refugees that Australia should accept are those sponsored by UNHCR from recognised refugee camps (capped at 12500/a)
 - Australia should repatriate any refugees who arrive by boat and/or plane
 - Australia should detain (i.e. imprison) any people who apply for asylum here
 - Australia should retain the deterrent of offshore detention to dissuade potential refugees (and people smugglers) from coming to Australia
 - Australia should close offshore detention and accept NZ's offer to take these refugees
 - Australia should increase its refugee intake to ... 20000, 30000 or ??? per year
 - Australia's refugee policies strike the right balance between compassion and deterrent
 - It is okay to detain asylum seekers in detention for more than 10 years if this keeps our borders secure.

Opening the Scriptures together

Read the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

² After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

¹³When they 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.'

¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'

¹⁶When 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. ¹⁷Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸'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.'^[d]

¹⁹After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.'

²¹So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³and 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.

The wise men (vv. 1-12) were astrologers (magi in Greek) who follow a star in order to honour the newly born king (= Messiah) of the Jews. It was accepted in Greek mythology that gods could have children through human mothers, and that such miraculous birth stories could be accompanied by astronomical events.

- What was Matthew trying to do by including the story of the wise men?
- How do their motivations and actions compare with King Herod, the self-proclaimed King of the Jews? Again what is Matthew doing here? (Note that this Herod is Herod the Great who reigned as a puppet king on behalf of the Romans from around 34BCE to 1BCE. One of his sons, Herod Antipas, features in the Passion account of Jesus).

The Adults Only version of the Christmas story really begins from v 13 onwards ... This whole section is filled with references and allusions to stories from the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the OT) as Matthew locates his story as fulfilment of OT hopes.

Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt as refugees after a warning in a dream (vv. 13-15).

- Who else fled to Egypt to survive? Is it therefore okay to seek asylum in another country to escape persecution or difficult personal circumstances?
- Many of the OT's guidelines on how to treat foreigners (or aliens) living in the land refer to Israel's historic experience of living as refugees in Egypt (e.g.
 - Ex 23:9, Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.
 - Lev 19:34, The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.
 - Deut 10:19, And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.
- How do these guidelines compare with Australia's current treatment of refugees?

Herod senses he was duped by the wise men and responds by killing all the children near Bethlehem under two years of age (vv. 16-18). The voice weeping in Ramah (v 18) is a quotation from Jeremiah 31:15 where Jewish mothers are weeping over their sons either killed by the invading Babylonians or grieving their forced enslavement and deportation to Babylon.

- But note God's response in Jeremiah 31:16-17.

¹⁶This is what the LORD says:

'Restrain your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears,
for your work will be rewarded,'
declares the LORD.

'They will return from the land of the enemy.

¹⁷So there is hope for your descendants,'
declares the LORD.

'Your children will return to their own land.

- The slaughter of the children may also recall Pharaoh's actions in Exodus 1:15-16, 22.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ¹⁶'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.' ... Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: 'Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.'

- On this occasion, who was saved from the slaughter?

- While Luke's version of the Christmas story abounds with joy and song, Matthew's version is much grimmer and focuses on deception, death and grief. God is very much involved in both stories. What do you think is the point of Matthew's story and why is it a powerful and important part of the Christmas story?
- Is it safe to follow this Messiah?

Pray for ourselves and others

Blessing