

## Getting the message

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church Franklin, Massachusetts on the Second Sunday after Christmas, January 3, 2010.

*Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."* Matthew 2:13

It is all over too soon. The peaceful image of the newborn child is the most powerful moment in history. The birth of Christ brings together heaven and earth in the axis of all history. The happiness of the holy family doesn't last for long as Joseph is warned in a dream that they must flee Herod's wrath. Herod's jealous nature would make him go to any extreme, even a pogrom to eliminate any threat to his power. His order to eliminate every male child under the age of two is an act of genocide repeated all too often in the holocaust and "ethnic cleansing" and acts of terrorism.

The suppressed minority of the Jewish people living in an occupied land is looking for a new regime. Many see the birth of Jesus as a hope for their deliverance from oppression. Herod feels deceived and his vengeful wrath holds no bounds. What he doesn't realize is that his fears are all unnecessary. Jesus did not come to lead a political or military revolution; he came to reform the faith of Israel. He wants to change the way people think and act.

What are we to think of Joseph being warned of Herod in a dream? The Bible tells us that one of the ways God communicates with us is through our dreams. In the Old Testament, Jacob's young son Joseph wins acclaim for his ability to interpret dreams. Today, therapists rely upon their patients to relate what is going on in their subconscious through interpretation of their dreams. Though many of us would say that our dreams don't make much sense, making an effort to interpret them can be a way telling us what is going on as well as a way that God may be speaking to us in our subconscious.

Joseph takes the warning seriously as he and Mary and their newborn child escape into Egypt. Their Israelite ancestors were enslaved in Egypt until Moses led them out slavery into the Promised Land of Israel. History is full of stories of whole populations migrating away from corrupt and violent regimes to the safety of another land. Egypt had large populations of exiled Jews living in urban areas. When Joseph and Mary and their child arrive in Egypt they find themselves among other refugees from political oppression.

There is a legend that while Joseph and Mary were on their journey to Egypt they were confronted by robbers. They might have perished were it not for one of the thieves who was so moved by the sight of the Christ child that he refused to let any harm come to them. Years later, Jesus meets the thief again. He is the penitent thief on the cross who upholds Jesus' innocence and is assured that he will be with Jesus in paradise.

Some years later, Joseph learns through a dream that Herod has died and takes his family and leaves the land of Egypt to return to their homeland. Herod left the rule of the land to his three sons; Archelaus is given charge of Judea, Herod Antipas rules Galilee and Philip is responsible for the land beyond the Jordan. The death of Herod does not solve the persecution because Archelaus is worse than his father by causing great violence and human destruction in Judea. Joseph takes his family to the safer area in the town of Nazareth in Galilee.

Nazareth is no small town, but a center of commerce in the hills of southern Galilee. Even today, you can see that it is densely populated area with much activity. It is surrounded by the routes taken by caravans of travelers coming from different directions. Growing up in Nazareth, Jesus has the opportunity to meet many different people from different cultures.

King Herod represents the dark figures with whom we have to contend. I have had mine and I am sure you have had yours. Over the years, from time to time I have had to work with some people who just made life difficult. Instead of being team players, they were contentious and uncooperative. It isn't enough to ignore them if you have to work with them. A person who is emotionally unstable with huge ego needs can make things very difficult. If you don't do anything about it, they gain power and influence and cause more confusion. Contentious and difficult people have to be confronted and if all else fails you just wait them out. In time, their influence goes away. The only thing you can do is to remain true to what God wants and try to be an example of better behavior. If you act as they do, you are no better. Refusal to play according to their tactics makes you stronger.

The non-violent, converting approach places love over hatred and has proven to resolve long standing conflicts in society. No where has non-violent resistance been more significant than in the leadership of the civil rights movement in resisting racial oppression. It took time, but the message got across as the church took the lead in guaranteeing the rights of all citizens. The cast of characters in that drama included descendants of slaves and slave owners, mayors, sheriffs, governors and the Ku Klux Klan. Some of them were converted while others retreated cowardly into the shadows of history, vowing never to give in.

The greatest gift ever given is the powerful love of Christ that confronts the difficult people in our lives. History has shown that the force of love is very effective in confounding the forces of hatred. Love should never be confused with liking. We don't have to like difficult people, but love demands that we give them the respect we expect for ourselves. Showing compassion to difficult people may seem naïve and simplistic, but by the grace of God it works.