

THE SERMON for Christmas 1, 29th December 2019.

Readings: Isaiah 63: 7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2: 10-18; Matthew 2: 13-23.

Well, here we are ... have you recovered from Christmas?

I would hope and pray that you all had a wonderful time and was able to spend time with those who are important to you. However, I know that for some it was a lot more challenging this year than normal – a loved one no longer there, families separated, or just because you are alone or maybe because of illness.

Did you get some interesting presents?

Whether or not you did, we all have a lot to be grateful for. Family, friends, people who care for us, a roof over our heads, food on our table, air to breathe, a beautiful, safe place to live. Being able to worship free from fear – fear of danger, fear of persecution. And a gracious, merciful God who loves us - gave his Son for us. God with us, Immanuel.

Hopefully you have all got a little tag and something to write with. I encourage you to think about what you are grateful for – what you have to give thanks for. As things come to mind, I ask you to write it down on your tag, and at the end of the sermon, I encourage you to come and place it on one of the trees, and, if you wish, you can light a candle, in thanks for someone who has meant something special to you.

We have spent time with the baby in the manger, but it is time to move on. For those of you who were here on Christmas morning, I said that if we get stuck at the manger, we are missing the point. The story doesn't stop at the manger, with Christmas. Christmas Day is only the beginning of the new chapter in an ongoing story.

The prophet Isaiah reminds his listeners of the wonderful acts of the Lord, acts which has gone on throughout history. His calling and care for his ungrateful people. That care continues through the ages - it is seen in today's Gospel reading ... God's care for his newborn Son, the warning, the flight to Egypt.

It seems a little ironic that the Holy family would escape to Egypt - Egypt the place where the Jews were enslaved only to be rescued through God's intervention by Moses in the Exodus. And yet Egypt, which played such a negative part in that chapter of Jewish history, went on to become a place of refuge. Often throughout the troubled centuries before Jesus came, when some peril ... some tyranny ... some persecution made life intolerable for the Jews, they sought refuge in Egypt. The result was that every city in Egypt had its colony of Jews; apparently in the city of Alexandria there were more than a million Jews and certain districts of the city had been entirely handed over to them. And so, Joseph, finding himself and his new family in danger, did what countless Jews had done before him, fled to Egypt.

There are many theories and legends surrounding the flight to Egypt. Some throw doubt on the event and accuse Matthew of using this story to prove certain "prophecies", which followed back to their Old Testament roots, prove not even to be related to the long-awaited Messiah, let alone prophecies concerning Him.

Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience and his gospel is filled with Old Testament quotes, which Matthew uses as "proofs" that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah and that all the events which took place were written about beforehand.

Matthew sees in the flight into Egypt a fulfilment of the word spoken by the prophet Hosea. He quotes it in the form: "Out of Egypt have I called my son." That is a

quotation from Hosea 11:1, which reads: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." Obviously referring to the Exodus when Moses led the Israelites from the land of Egypt to the "Promised Land", and therefore, in its original form, had nothing to do with Jesus or any promised Messiah.

On a lighter, more positive note, there is a lovely legend, a children's story, which appeared some time during the mists of early Christianity.

When Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus were on their way to Egypt, as evening came, they were weary, and they sought refuge in a cave. It was very cold, so cold that the ground was white with hoar frost. A little spider saw the little baby Jesus, and he wished so much that he could do something to keep him warm in the cold night. He decided to do the only thing he could and spun his web across the entrance of the cave, to make, as it were a curtain there.

Along the path came a detachment of Herod's soldiers, seeking for children to kill to carry out Herod's bloodthirsty order. When they came to the cave, they were about to burst in to search it, but their captain noticed the spider's web, covered with the white hoar frost and stretched right across the entrance to the cave. Inspecting the web, he said: "Look, at the spider's web there, it is quite unbroken and there cannot possibly be anyone in the cave for they would certainly have torn the web."

So, the story goes, the soldiers passed on, and left the holy family in peace, because a little spider had spun its web across the entrance to the cave. And that, so they say, is why to this day we put tinsel on our Christmas trees, for the glittering tinsel streamers stand for the spider's web, white with the hoar frost, stretched across the entrance of the cave.

It is a wonder Disney, or someone hasn't picked up the story!

So, what about you and me? Are we aware of God working in our lives? His gracious care and concern for us?

We have the wonderful example of Joseph and his instant obedience to God. Okay, Joseph was looking after some very special people and it was in God's interest to care for them. But it is also in his interest to look after each one of us, care for us, nurture us, inspire us, so that the love we have in our hearts for the Christ-child may be fulfilled in lives which bring honour and glory to our God.

Let us take a few moments to ponder, to reflect on what it is we are grateful for, then I invite you to bring your tag and hang it on one of the trees.

God is with us, Immanuel. Amen.

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