Talk-Jan. 2021

Escape to Egypt. Hos. 11: 1-4 & Matt. 2: 13-15

Today, we explore the last episode in the Christmas story-the Escape to Egypt-which can give us some encouragements, as we start 2021. The true Christmas story vividly contrasts ‘who the Lord Jesus is’ with ‘how’ & ‘why He came into the world’, as we shall see. In a recent TV quiz show one question was “which of these three details of the Christmas story are specifically mentioned in the Bible? ‘a donkey took Mary to Bethlehem-an angel told shepherds near Bethlehem about Christ’s birth-three Kings visited the Holy Family.’ Only the second detail was the correct answer, which shows that the traditional version of the Nativity like Christmas cards mislead & miss the real point. For instance, Christmas cards with robins, mistletoe, Santa & family merriment feature self indulgence, materialism & one- -upmanship with celebrations rather than God’s stupendous gift to the world of His Son-Emanuel-God with us.

Again famous paintings of the Nativity glamourise Christ’s birth. The stable may look tumble down, but Mary is immaculate, usually in a rich spotless blue robe with a few clean & quiet animals nearby. She is not really the exhausted, young first time mother, using a feeding trough for a cradle in a smelly, draughty & dirty outhouse or cave. Furthemore, Nativity plays, often for dramatic effect, run together the birth & the visits of the shepherds & the Magi, whereas it seems likely that the Saviour was born in 5BC-a comet was recorded then by the Chinese which could have been the Star. Herod’s death in 4BC after the Massacre of the Innocents (males of 2 years & under) meant that the Lord Jesus was between one & two years, when the family had to escape to Egypt. As some of the elements of the traditional Nativity can mislead, the details in Scripture about the Saviour’s birth, the subsequent events, & the fall out from the Magi’s visit do strongly contrast “who He is” with “how He became flesh”. The birth of the King of Kings to a poor family in a humble setting is in striking contrast to what might be expected-an opulent royal palace, comfort or ceremony. A brief survey of the vicissitudes & dangers of His low key start will show these contrast & God guiding & protecting, which can comfort us in the New Year.

The first of the four striking contrasts is that between this very ordinary background & the series of extraordinary events when the eternal God intervened in our space/time world. Nazareth, where Mary lived & Joseph settled, was in a backward, despised & primitive area near the trade route to the Mediterranean Sea, with so many Gentiles that pious Jews might think twice about going through it. Remember Nathanial’s comment “can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” The family background was modest-Joseph was a craftsman, a carpenter or stonemason, so this was not the context suitable for an amazing event, the birth of the King of the Jews, God’s Messiah. This extraordinary event was known only to Joseph & Mary-there was no grandiose royal fanfare or excitement or publicity involved.

Secondly, despite this simple background, things developed unusually. Mary was pregnant, when she married Joseph. If this had leaked out, Mary could have been in serious trouble (even suffering death by stoning) & Joseph might have been guilty of complicity in covering up the sin. When Jesus said the Jews’ actions in not believing in Him suggested their father was not Abraham but the devil in Jn. 8: 39-44, they retorted in v. 41 “we are not illegitimate children” Could this hint that doubts about Joseph being His father might have been circulating? It was not the most auspicious start for an important royal birth, nor would the need to trek south to Bethlehem for the census of allegiance to the Emperor be the best circumstance for proper ante natal care. It did mean, however, that the family was shielded from prurient wiseacres in Nazareth counting up the months between marriage & birth. This inauspicious beginning was further compounded by anxieties about finding suitable lodging in Bethlehem for a safe delivery. Could the outhouse, where animals were stabled, be more different than a palace for a royal birth? Where were the attendants to help? In Bethlehem they probably knew no one-no friend or family to give assistance & comfort. What a bleak start, physically & emotionally, for the young family!

If the unusual contrasts outlined above were negative, there was a contrasting positive, provided Mary & Joseph could really believe it. Shepherds came to relay the angel’s message in Lk. 2: 11 that “a Saviour who is Christ the Lord” had been born in Bethlehem. He would be recognized, because He was lying wrapped in cloths in a feeding trough. There was no mistaking that sign & the Saviour was seen to be the Messiah-the deliverer of Israel from the Romans (it was assumed)-one who was long hoped for by devout Jews. The downside was that shepherds were notorious for being unreliable, thieves, crooks & dangerous-similar feelings about tinkers & gypsies existed here 100 years ago. So these messengers were hardly the best ones for this momentous announcement of the Messiah’s arrival.

Lastly, the visit of the Magi had a similar contrast-an upside & a downside. They came to Jerusalem-perhaps, over a year later- seeking the King of the Jews, whose birth was indicated by the star they had followed. Herod, King of Judaea, was instantly suspicious of another threat to his rule. The Messiah of God might be much more dangerous & difficult to deal with than the fractious opposition of his family members & others. Herod, unctuously, asked the Magi to tell him where the child was so that he could worship Him later. The Adoration of the Magi seemed to reinforce what Mary & Joseph had heard separately from two angels, & jointly from the shepherds. The downside was that Herod, ever paranoid, planned a preemptive strike on male children of 0-2 years in Bethlehem. At God’s behest, the family escaped from Bethlehem to Egypt & so to all the unpromising events of their life was added that of being refugees. Far from home & family, the prospect was of eking out an existence in a foreign land, though they were assured it was not for ever Matt. 2: 13. Nonetheless, they must have felt at their lowest ebb-the contrast with what they had been told about the baby’s status & the humdrum dangerous time they had endured must have been so stark.

What is the true significance of this turbulent start to the Lord Jesus’ life on earth? Firstly of three, human existence is always uncertain. In His case, there had been one or two near squeaks of which the threat from Herod was the most obvious besides the physical dangers of the run up to His birth. His time as a refugee in Egypt cannot have been easy- a refugee often feels dehumanized, degraded , crushed, ignored & forgotten. It was to be followed by relocating to Nazareth, as danger still lurked further south in Judaea-Matt. 2: 22. This uncertainty about survival, perhaps, rings more true for us now than hitherto with the seemingly arbitrary spread of the Covid 19 pandemic. In the Lord Jesus’ case this turbulent, uncertain start continued into the hard grind of life for 1st C artisans. I find it so encouraging that He knows what human existence is like, how tough it is-He knows the griefs that wring the human heart-He experienced those testing early days, life as a refugee, the death of friends like Lazarus, the disciples’ almost exasperating lack of understanding (Lk. 24: 25), their desertion of Him & His betrayal by Judas. As Heb. 4: 15 says “..we do not have a High Priest (Jesus, who intercedes for us) who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted (tested) in every way just as we are-yet was without sin.”

Secondly, Joseph’s obedience is highlighted-he follows the angel’s call “at once in the middle of the night” Matt. 2: 14. They were up & away without hesitation or quibbling. He had shown obedience after the first dream in Matt. 1: 20-obedience when told, later, to return in 2: 19-20 & again in v. 22 he followed instructions to go to Nazareth. Lastly ,Matthew in 2: 15 talks of Hosea’s prophecy being fulfilled, when the Holy Family returned from Egypt. God knew what He was doing, had the whole problem under control & revealed it before hand. Prophets in Scripture, sometimes, foretell the future, which we assume is their main role. In fact, they usually declare God’s view of a particular issue, often speaking of things within the context of their own time, which, later, takes on a deeper meaning. Indeed, they may have wondered, occasionally, what their prophecy meant in their own time. Hosea 1:1 is clear to understand, for it refers to Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt in the Exodus. In vv 3-4 is the heart warming expression of God’s love, as He planned to lead them out of captivity. Sadly, v. 2 shows the Jews’ ingratitude, heedlessness despite many calls to mend their ways. In Hosea’s time these verses were an appeal to the Jews to return to the Lord. Matthew, however, sees them as foreshadowing another Exodus with the Messiah leading his people out of rebellion, sin & selfishness rather than Egypt as Moses had done. This should encourage us that God knew what would happen, how He would protect the Holy Family & even hinted at the outcome.

What can we learn from these three significant issues we’ve looked at?

Firstly, the contrast between the privileged expectation of a royal birth & the Lord Jesus’ turbulent arrival & harsh later life means we can blurt out to him exactly how we’re feeling about life. He knows what it’s like & wants to sustain us. And we can rejoice with awe that He endured all this for love of us.

Secondly, there’s Joseph’s obedience to inspire us to do likewise, however ropey we’re feeling, which we may have to blurt out to the Lord, “who works in us both to will & to do according to his good pleasure.” Phil 2: 12- a great promise to encourage us.

Thirdly, Matthew’s use of Hosea’s prophecy reminds us that God has a loving plan & has everything in hand, even when that seems most unlikely. God knew who the Lord Jesus is &, knowing how the Nativity would unfold, protected Him from all the dangers. We know who He is, how He came & why He came. Therefore, we should give thanks for His endurance & love.