**What happens next!**

Tom Wright, former Bishop of Durham and, popular theologian wrote of his amazement when, at the end of a Christmas service, a renowned historian who was famous for his scepticism towards Christianity and had been at the service with his family, bounded across to Tom Wright and expressed the opinion - “I’ve finally worked it out, he beamed, worked out why people like Christmas!” Tom, taken aback, responded by asking him to explain what he meant to which the renowned historian replied by saying: “a baby threatens no one” he said, continuing - “so the whole thing is a happy event that means nothing at all!” Not surprisingly Tom Wright was left somewhat speechless because, if the renowned historian had been ‘listening’ he would have realised that at the heart of the Christmas story in Matthew’s gospel is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man around, Herod, that he demands the death of all babies under two years of age in Bethlehem and its environs. Why would you do that if the baby was of no threat to anyone!

Herod was greatly disturbed by the visit of the Wise Men. Not surprisingly, they stopped first at Herod’s palace in Jerusalem enquiring after the baby: “where is the infant king of the Jews”. After all kings are normally born in palaces, where else would you expect to find one. Herod’s chief priests and scribes were able to tell him that the Christ would be born ‘at Bethlehem in Judea’, quoting from the Prophet Micah (5.1) On learning that the baby was to be born in ‘his’ city Herod asked that the wise men return and tell him where they found the Christ child so that he too could go and pay homage to him.

The star continued to lead them to the Christ child where they, on bended knees, gave him homage and gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh. However, in a dream they were warned not to go back to Herod but instead return to their own country by a different route.

Our Gospel reading this morning starts directly after that visit with ‘the angel of the Lord’ appearing to Joseph in a dream telling him to immediately leave Bethlehem and escape to Egypt because of the evil intentions of Herod.

The gold, frankincense and myrrh offered by the Wise Men reveal the Christ-child as king and God and sacrifice. And what is proclaimed in those earlier verses is already starting to be enacted in the verses we are listening to. Once Herod realises, he has been ‘tricked’ by the Wise Men not returning to tell him where to find the baby, the ‘furious’ Herod commands that all children under the age of two in Bethlehem and surrounding district are to be slaughtered.

Herod is quite right to identify the Christ-child as a threat and our renowned historian missed the point entirely. The conflict between Jesus’ reign and that of all other kingdoms is because his kingdom is “an alternative world, an alternative people and an alternative politics but firmly established within the world. “Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God’, Mark recorded. (Mark 12.17).

While Matthew lays on with a trowel the truth of Christ’s kingship in this story, we also see foreshadowed the part that he plays as sacrificial victim (“Therefore “it was appropriate that God, for whom everything exists and through whom everything exists, should make perfect, through suffering, the leader who would take them to their salvation” )– Hebrews 2.10

Jesus escapes the clutches of those worldly authorities who would ‘do away with him’ on this occasion to grow and develop into manhood and maturity. “it was essential that he should in this way become completely like his brothers so that he could be a compassionate and trustworthy high priest of God’s religion, able to atone for human sins” we are told in Hebrews at verse 17. (Hebrews 2.17). And Jesus atoned for our sins by dying on the cross. By doing so “he is able to help others who are tempted” i.e., us. So by living as a human being we know that we are not forsaken in our suffering but led through it by Christ himself.

Herod’s reaction to the birth of a baby is both chilling and unfortunately very human and a reaction we understand too well. His is unbridled worldly power reacting to the existence of a realm of truth and righteousness which he cannot and, knows he cannot, manipulate or control.

There is no historical evidence that this slaughter actually took place but, if you are simply looking for historical corroboration for this event please note - Matthew never intended his narrative to be a biography of Jesus of Nazareth and if you think it is then you are totally missing the point Matthew is trying to make. It is easy to get stuck in the story itself and, as children, we don’t look beyond the words. But we are adults and we do need to look beyond the words themselves to see the point of the story that Matthew is writing for us. Herod was indeed a nasty piece of work, murdering both his wife and his own sons because he saw them as rivals, just one example and, that is chronicled.

Matthew’s purpose in his writing was to build up his readers’ faith in their very present and living Christ. And the point Matthew is making with this account is two-fold – firstly to emphasise the contrast between the worldly realm that Herod occupies with all its brutal hold on power, corrupting influences and misery wrought on all its subjects. Herod epitomises what autocratic worldly power is. Just look at the misery being wrought on the people of Ukraine at present by the warped sense of destiny for Russia that Putin espouses. And he is just one of the current crop of nasties. Secondly, Matthew is depicting Jesus as a second Moses.

If you recall, in the age of the Patriarchs Egypt became a refuge for Israel. Joseph (he of the multi-coloured dream coat) escaping from his murderous brothers found wealth and power in the service of Pharoah in Egypt and was able to rescue his father and brothers from famine. Generations later that journey was reversed with Moses leading them to the Promised Land and in so doing marked the birth of a nation. “Out of Egypt I have called my son” wrote the prophet Hosea, referring to the Exodus. And Matthew quotes it to indicate to his readers that the story of the Holy Family’s flight from Herod must be seen as prelude to the birth of the new Israel through the birth of the Christ child, the Messiah who the people of Israel had been waiting for, had been promised. Once Herod is dead, they are able to return to the promised land where Jesus can grow up in a secure environment.

At the very heart of the Christmas story is a vulnerable baby whose vulnerability is emphasised by the portrayed extreme reaction of the world into which he is born. Whatever else you may think about Jesus, from his birth onwards, people certainly found Jesus a threat. So much for babies not threatening anyone. This baby did. He upset the worldly power-games and in time, suffered the usual fate of people who do that.

The shadow of the cross falls over the story from this moment on. Jesus is born with a price on his head. Plots are hatched; angels are kept busy with warnings – Joseph takes Mary and the infant Jesus away to Egypt to escape the murderous clutches of Herod, only returning with news from another angelic visit of Herod’s death.

The gospel of Jesus the Messiah was born in a land of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Matthew is emphasising to us that what we see in Jesus, even when things are at their darkest, is the fulfilment of the scriptures. This is how Israel’s redeemer was to appear; this is how God would set about liberating his people and bringing justice to the world.

What do you think would have happened if Jesus had been born and raised in a palace? No point arriving in comfort when the whole world is in misery; no point in having an easy life, when the world suffers violence and injustice. If he is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be where the pain is. That’s what this chapter is about. I read recently that In Ukraine there has been such a demand for Bibles it has been difficult to keep up with it; the message of hope that the Bible brings always seems to be clearest to those who are in extreme suffering; it makes sense when nothing else does.

Matthew in making his points quotes from - Hosea “out of Egypt I have called my son” to emphasise that Jesus’ role and vocation is to make Israel’s story complete; Jeremiah in verse 18 which tells of God’s renewal of the covenant bringing Israel back from their exile at last. And finally, Matthew is linking the settling of the family in Nazareth with the prophecy in Isaiah 11.1. There the word ‘nazir’ means ‘branch’. A branch says Isaiah, shall grow out of the root of Jesse; in other words, a new beginning will be made for the royal house of David.

This is what the whole passage is promising and Matthew is determined to find hints of it wherever he can. In Jesus, not despite the frantic and tragic events seemingly surround his birth and infancy, but because of them, God is providing the salvation and rescue that Israel longed for and through that his justice for the world.

By the conclusion of this passage, Herod may be dead but we have not heard the last of the house of Herod; the young child who is born to be the true king of the Jews has been introduced to us as the bearer of God’s salvation and indeed of God’s personal presence and we will learn more about that as Matthew’s Gospel unfolds. Amen