

SERMON FOR FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY | 29.12.2019

Isaiah 63: 7-9; Hebrews 2: 10-18; St Matthew 2: 13-23

For many of us Christmas has been another good reminder of how amazingly lucky we are to have a roof over our heads, friends or family to be with, food on the table and time to do things we don't normally have time for. In Church there have been loads of unfamiliar faces to make up for all those who are away at this time of the year. In our readings today we celebrate the closeness between the members of the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, radiating joy to their various visitors whether shepherds with their sheep or wise men and their camels.

All over the world sermons will be preached today talking about how we should try to make our families – our natural families and our Church family – as good as the Holy Family we see printed on cards at this time of the year.

But this isn't the Vicar of Dibley and our lives aren't that shallow. Friends and families can be a major source of tension and unhappiness as we all know, and often none more so that when we are almost artificially thrown together at Christmas.

So it isn't surprising that the Nativity story has its dark side too. In a very short space of time after Jesus' birth we read that Herod - tricked by the Three Wise Men out of his chance to put an end to his new born rival - orders the murder of every child of a similar age in what we now know as the Massacre of the Innocents. It is only some kind of dream, some kind of premonition that alerts Joseph to what is going on and, in the nick of time, he manages to take his tiny family away from Bethlehem and into exile in Egypt.

We know the story. But perhaps what we don't get to the root of what lies behind not just this event but many other stories in literature including the Bible: what we might identify as cold, old fashioned revenge.

Think of the many stories you know – from Shakespeare's Othello to the light-weight crime fiction on TV like Midsummer Murders to Death in Paradise; they all have at their heart the desire for revenge.

Here in Church we are more likely liable to use stories like that of Cain and Abel and the way Cain reacted when God loved his brother's sacrifice more than his, to show how revenge works. But it doesn't take too many hours with the Old Testament to see how even God himself, in the early days, was not above taking revenge on people (even whole nations) when they crossed him. When the Egyptians won't let Moses go, God's revenge is seen first in the wiping out of all the first born boys, and only then does he go on to drown Pharaoh and the whole of his army in the Red Sea after Moses and the people of Israel have got through on dry land.

And the reason why these stories resonate with us is because we see revenge being wrought all around us. Tit for tat economic warfare between the US and China superpowers is rooted in competition – and revenge; so too the dreadful beheading of 11 hostages by Boko Haram in Nigeria this week, said to be in retaliation for the assassination of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his spokesman earlier this year. This is what you did to us so...

For Herod, a weak puppet king in a system which could so easily squeeze him out of the picture, it was also fear that drove his revenge and his attempt to wipe out Jesus. And it's the same today: strangely, the now almost routine murders of young people on the streets of our Borough are less about sex and drugs (though they play a part) than they are straight turf wars between rival groups like the very local Red Pitch and Essex Road gangs who were involved in a shooting recently along Greenman Street. As the local police will tell you, what these gangs fear most is being seen to be weak in case their members end up being overpowered by a harder, tougher gang from just over the invisible borders they have created for themselves.

Revenge is a hugely powerful emotion. It is driven from hurt pride, envy and spite and is fueled by the desire to dominate and not to be taken for a ride. It is, literally, lethal.

And yet, before we start getting high and mighty, it is worth asking just how many of those feelings lie within us too. Not in terms of overt violence of course, but in terms of intent: how many times have we felt cheated by someone or something – and felt we wanted to get our own back?

While I appreciate the word revenge probably sounds too aggressive, we are all liable to feel some of those emotions welling up inside us when we feel we have been sidelined. Why should we be bossed about or made to give way?

The story of Jesus' escape into Egypt can be taken at lots of different levels but there is one very simple comment that we could make: that the example of the Holy Family is to be seen in the way they just bided their time until the situation got better and they could return. Sometime it is prudent just to get out of the situation rather than to react.

But I also like the words of the 1st century philosopher, Marcus Aurelius: *The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury.* Or the more contemporary Shannon Alder: *Anger, resentment and a desire for revenge don't change of the hearts of the other, they only change you* is also salutary.

St Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount is clear enough: *You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'* But I tell you, *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*

Because that is where our study of the Bible takes us: from the vengeance of Cain in Genesis, to the open-handedness of Jesus: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*

Given our need to be forgiven too, perhaps Kahlil Gibran ought to have the last word: *An eye for an eye can only lead to the whole world being blind.*