

Matthew 2:13-23 God's will will be done

Introduction

On 14 December 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, unspeakable horrors were being reported in the midst of a community described as one of the safest in America. Within hours of the tragic events of that day taking place local police officers confirmed that twenty children and six adults had lost their lives. A twenty-year old young man entered the school with a number of guns and appeared to shoot people at random, prior to turning one of the guns on himself, taking his own life. It was not the kind of community where violence or gun crime was expected. One parent, Stephen Delgiadice, whose eight-year-old daughter was at Sandy Hook School on Friday but was not harmed, said the shooting was traumatic for the small town. "It's alarming, especially in Newtown, Connecticut, which we always thought was the safest place in America," Mr Delgiadice told Associated Press. What causes someone to carry out acts like these? How do you put into words an adequate response to such an event? At the White House, in Washington DC, United States President Barrack Obama drew attention to a series of unconnected guns attacks in the USA in 2012: In July an attacker killed 12 people at a premiere of a Batman film in Aurora, Colorado. In August six people died at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. Just this week two people died in a shooting at a shopping mall in the state of Oregon. At the White House, an emotional President Barack Obama cited those incidents as he called for "meaningful action... regardless of politics". "Our hearts are broken today, for the parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers of these children, and for the families of the adults who were lost." Mr Obama offered condolences to the families of survivors too, saying "their children's innocence has been torn away from them too early, and there are no words that will ease their pain". He wiped tears from his eyes as he spoke of the "overwhelming grief" at the loss of life. [various news websites, December 2012]

In our imagination we could travel around the world and name country after country where serious violence is taking place and injustice is rampant. We struggle to comprehend how difficult life is for our brothers and sisters in Christ in Iraq or Somalia, for example. Matthew 2:13-23 covers the part of the Christmas story that is usually omitted not only from nativity plays, but also from sermons and other Christmas messages. Like certain types of TV programmes that require later evening slots due to their content, passages like this one are less than appealing in the season of 'good will to all peoples'. Yet this is part of the narrative of our Lord's life and a reminder that our own will also be overshadowed at times by hardships and disappointments; by sorrows and frustrations, yet not exclusively so as we also have our joys and blessings; our rejoicing at answered prayers for ourselves and for other people. What is important here is to see that God's will was not hindered by the actions of an evil tyrant like Herod. That man tried to carry out his evil plans, but God had the final word. In the midst of our joys and sorrows we too can know that He stands with us through each stage of our earthly lives.

Matthew in his Gospel is convinced that the Old Testament prepares the way for Jesus and provides both explicit and implicit guidance concerning His coming, His life and the purpose for which He came. Therefore, when Matthew refers back to the Old Testament he does so both to cite clear quotations of key passages, but also to refer in more general terms to the fulfilment of God's plan and purposes in the person of Jesus. This point will become clearer as we look briefly at the three references Matthew makes to the Old Testament in Matthew 2:13-23. Behind it all he wants to reassure his readers that though at a human level the rampage of evil appears unabated God's ultimate purposes for His world will be realised. His timescale is often much longer than we would like, but His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

1. The warning given to Joseph (Matthew 2:13-15)

(a) **The message from the angel** (Matthew 2:13) *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."* God asked Mary and Joseph to undertake an extraordinary task, but also provided supernatural resources to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities. Zechariah saw with their physical eyes an angel and heard Gabriel's voice proclaiming God's message to them; Joseph received God's guidance in a number of special dreams. In a situation where the odds are definitely against the success of this mission, divine intervention ensures that God's purposes are carried out. It is interesting that the wise men also heeded a dream warning against returning to Herod in Jerusalem and as a result left for home by a different route, almost certainly by crossing over into the territory today known as Jordan, outside Herod's political jurisdiction. The place where God directed Mary and Joseph to go, Egypt, was a familiar refuge for Jews who wanted to live for a time or long-term outside the Holy Land. Various sources have suggested that not only did most Egyptian cities have a Jewish quarter, but one Alexandria had almost a million Jews in residence in a number of districts which were almost totally Jewish in population. As a result, it is likely that there would have been some people of their own ethnic and religious identity who might have been willing to assist a young family who had recently come from their homeland. Notice the familiar biblical pattern here. Joseph was told to go to Egypt and to stay there until God told him - until further notice. Joseph would have been less than human to want to know exactly where he had to go and what he had to do, and how long he had to stay in exile. But God didn't give him that information. We too only receive sufficient information from God to take the next step of obedience in response to His revealed will to us. Paul had to remind the Corinthian Christians: *For we live by faith, not by sight* (II Corinthians 5:7). Maybe you need to be reminded of that this Christmas, on the threshold of a new year. Joseph did get a reason for taking this step – Herod's plan to murder Jesus. Some liberal Bible scholars doubt the accuracy of Matthew chapter two claiming that the flight to Egypt never happened. They may not have noticed that the enemies of Jesus in the Jewish faith while He was alive on earth had no doubts. There are a number of comments in their writings that make reference to Jesus' exile in Egypt (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol.1, p. 34; See also Jewish tractate *Sanhedrin*, 107b, cited in L.L. Morris, *Matthew*, p. 43.) so it is best to conclude with contemporary observers that Matthew records accurately the events described here.

(b) **The action taken by Joseph** (Matthew 2:14-15a) ¹⁴*So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,* ¹⁵*where he stayed until the death of Herod.* When Joseph had grasped that no change was not an option; that staying put endangered his family he took the only course of action open to him and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt. The action taken was decisive and appropriate. He could have delayed and put their lives in peril, but instead he heeded God's revelation and was blessed by the preservation of their lives. However, this did not mean that life was easy in Egypt. There must have been difficult days when all did not go well; in addition to others when it was clear they had done the right thing. As we on the threshold of another new year contemplate what God has in store for us we cannot expect it to be any different for us. There will be encouragements as we go forward in faith that will cause us to rejoice. There will also be some disappointments and challenges that need to be overcome, but in His strength we will accomplish the goals He has planned for us.

(c) **The prophecy cited by Matthew** (Matthew 2:15b) *And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called My son."* Matthew is rightly convinced that the whole focus of the Old Testament is to point forward to and prepare for the coming of Jesus. The work of God in the Old Testament era also reaches its climax in the person and work of Jesus. In Old Testament theology there is often an interplay between the 'one and the many'; in which a large group may be personified as if 'one person' or in which one person

represents the whole wider body of people. It is important to understand this point here if we are to interpret rightly the significance of Matthew's use here of the Old Testament. The first usage of this imagery concerned the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Listen to these words of instruction from the Lord to Moses in Midian prior to his return to Egypt to speak to the Israelites about God's future plans for the nation. ²¹ *The Lord said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.* ²² *Then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: **Israel is My firstborn son,*** ²³ *and I told you, "**Let My son go,** so he may worship me." (Exodus 4:21-23). Hosea in a sermon that makes various references to Israel's history includes these words which have as a primary reference the calling of the nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Hosea 11:1: *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.* Matthew sees the greater fulfilment of the Old Testament promises and blessings in God's Son par excellence –in Jesus. Therefore, he sees an extension of this miraculous blessing in the preservation and deliverance of the baby Jesus from Herod and His eventual safe return from Egypt. The use of the 'one and the many' also works the other way round in the New Testament. Do you remember at Jesus baptism the words of God the Father, recorded in Matthew 3:17: *This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased?* Now link them to the message of the angels from God to those who put their trust in Jesus, recorded in Luke 2:14: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people with whom He is well pleased.* The blessing of obedience by Jesus and the blessing to His followers on earth in parallel here; This is not how we would present a case in our era but Matthew's Jewish readers would have had no difficulty in grasping it and seeing the link with Jesus to God's purposes for the Jews in the Old Testament. In essence Matthew says –please look for God's bigger picture at work' don't fix your eyes primarily on the present time as your spiritual vision will be blurred and confused as you will miss so much of what God is doing. This is so timely in view of what he will record in Matthew 2:16-18 or as we make any kind of sense of much of the evil and suffering in the world today.*

2. The massacre carried out by Herod (Matthew 2:16-18)

(a)**The massacre ordered by Herod** (Matthew 2:16) ¹⁶ *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.* Some commentators said Herod or any ruler would never do anything so cruel! Which world do they live in! There have been in the past and in the present and no doubt in the future, rulers who will not hesitate to stoop to any depths to strength their own position. When Herod came to the throne he marked his accession by slaughtering all the members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Parliament. On another occasion to show he was in charge he ordered the execution of three hundred court officials. Later he arranged the murder of his beautiful wife Mariamne and her mother Alexandra; his wife was so beautiful, he reasoned that she must attract opportunities to be unfaithful to me –so I can prevent that ever happening. He killed his eldest son Antipater who would have succeeded him as King of Judea. The reason for this death- in case his son got ideas above his station and wanted Herod's job too soon. Two other sons of Herod, Alexander and Aristobulus, were also disposed of on the orders of their father. Shortly prior to his death he ordered the execution of some key respected leaders in Jerusalem. The reason was simple: he wanted to ensure that tears were being shed at the time of his own death and knew full well that no-one would mourn his passing, but they would for these good men (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol.1, pp. 36-37; see also Josephus, *Antiquities* for a contemporary account of a selection of Herod's atrocities). Does anyone doubt that a man who would carry out the acts recorded above, and many more

like them would hesitate for a moment to wipe out two village primary school classes in the hope of eliminating a child prophesied as a future King of the Jews? This is not the action of a sane stable well-balanced character any more than the actions of Thomas Hamilton in Dunblane or the young man who caused so much grief in Connecticut. The fact that this event was not recorded in official records at the time is not proof that it didn't happen. The harsh reality is that Herod committed so many vile atrocities that people took it for granted that this was what he would do and sought to blank them out, in the way that ordinary people in some loyalist or nationalist communities in Northern Ireland might have done at the height of the troubles there in the last few decades of the twentieth century.

It is not a surprise that this part of the Christmas story doesn't feature in nativity plays in our schools. Every one without exception (probably!) stops with the coming of the wise men. The reason is simple we want to live in a nice world where only good things happen. We want the good guys to always win and the bad guys to loose. The selective accounts of the first Christmas story are no different to how we want to view our world today. We want to see human history as progressive –and want to forget that the twentieth century was the most brutal violent and bloody in human history. Europeans want to be seen as in the premier league of civilisation –but in the light of the slaughter on the battlefields of World War One in France and Belgium; together with the genocidal activities of the Nazis in their gas chambers, these facts and others place that in serious doubt. So are people from other parts of the world therefore superior to us? No! No better and no worse; A moments reflection of Asia and Pol Pot and the tragedy of Cambodia comes to mind; think of Africa and the slaughter in Rwanda cannot be forgotten; and many more examples can be given from each region of the world, apart from Antarctica! Humanity is as capable of great evil as of great good. The world then and the world now contained, and contains, unspeakable evil, but that is never the last word. The world then and the world now contained, and contains, the potential for great good, for which we were created by God. We have the ability to make moral choices and are accountable to God and each other for the decisions we take. What is important for us here is that we keep our eyes fixed on God who has called us to live for Him in such a world; to accomplish the purposes to which He has given us the resources by His Spirit to the greater good not only of our families and friends, but also of the wider society. We must be heavenly minded in order to be of great earthly good. Or in the words of the author of Hebrews 12:1-3: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* This I trust is inspirational advice to all of us in the face of the adversity we all face at times.

(b) **The prophecy cited by Matthew** (Matthew 2:17-18) ¹⁷*Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”* Notice the way this reference in Jeremiah 31:15 is cited does not imply a causal link, as if God ordained the killing of these children. On the contrary, the words in the book of Jeremiah relate to the people exiled in Babylon who had seen children and other family members killed before their eyes and had viewed life as hopeless. They thought there was no future at the time. In any context of extreme violence and brutality it is no surprise that the future looks bleak. To the people of Bethlehem after Herod's actions local people would have taken years to recover any sense of normality after experiencing such traumatic events in their midst. When an Old Testament passage was cited by a New Testament writer they wished their readers or hearers to turn to that passage in its context to pick up the fuller meaning from it. To the exiles in Babylon Jeremiah continued with these words of assurance in Jeremiah 31:16-17: ¹⁶*This is what the Lord says: “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears,*

for your work will be rewarded,” declares the Lord. “They will return from the land of the enemy.¹⁷ So there is hope for your descendants,” declares the Lord. “Your children will return to their own land. That whole section of the prophecy of Jeremiah was communicating a message of hope in the midst of tragedy. The best known verses from it is Jeremiah 29:11-14: *For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*¹² *Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.*¹³ *You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.*¹⁴ *I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”* Evil is always evil. Pain and suffering, although part of this life was never part of God’s original purpose for His world. God’s purpose for His creation was wholly good. The evil one came to harm and to destroy that which was good. I John 3:8b reminds us: *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.* Through Jesus’ death and resurrection the power of the evil one was destroyed and the final triumph of God’s plans for His creation was assured. In the coming of Jesus, and in your life and mine to a lesser degree, God plans to work for the good of His people. Evil will never have the final word, whatever form it takes. There is never a totally hopeless situation with God. Herod thought he could thwart God’s purposes with a massacre of the innocents. He was wrong! Matthew’s citation of the Jeremiah prophecy was to say just as the Jewish people came back from exile to resurrect the nation after the mass killings by the Babylonians so also Jesus in the purposes of God was brought back safely from exile in Egypt. Therefore, be encouraged because He is also at work in your life and circumstances for your good and for His glory.

3. **The fulfilment of prophecy concerning Jesus** (Matthew 2:19-23)

(a) **The message from the angel** (Matthew 2:19-20)¹⁹ *After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”* Joseph had to be patient in Egypt to wait for God’s timing of the return to his homeland. God’s provision for his needs was clear. Once again one step at a time; as Joseph is obedient to the revealed will of God the way opens up for him to go forward. Exactly the same pattern is in place for each generation of God’s people. Will we trust Him to take care of our future? Matthew’s intention in writing this passage under the guidance of the Holy Spirit was in part to encourage his readers to see God at work in their own lives and to trust Him with their futures no matter how bleak they seemed at the time. We can struggle with health issues personally or in our family circle; it could be work issues or some problems in our relationship with the Lord, or some other pressing matter for us... however, whatever it may be the clear message of this passage is that there are no hopeless situations. Many appear to be hopeless, but that is not the final word on those situations as far as God is concerned. In the midst of our trials it may at times be appropriate to ask: Lord what are You trying to teach me through this situation? What can I learn from this predicament for my good that will be beneficial in the future? Sometimes like Job the Old Testament patriarch, the Lord impresses on us a call to trust Him more deeply with our future. If we are honest we all have our doubts and fears at times. God wants us as His children to entrust our future to Him. In the words of I Peter 5:7, taken from a letter written to believers enduring great hardships, the apostle and great Christian leader wrote: *Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.* May He enable us to do that in the power of His Holy Spirit in coming weeks, months and years.

(b) **The action taken by Joseph** (Matthew 2:21-23a)²¹ *So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.*²² *But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.* Herod had ruled a

territory larger than the Romans usually allowed to client kings. Therefore he divided his territory into three areas under the rule of three of his sons; leaving Judea and Samaria to Archelaus; Galilee and Perea to Herod Antipas and the regions of Iturea and Trachonitis in the northeast and beyond the Jordan to Philip. Archelaus marked the commencement of his reign with the slaughter of three thousand leading citizens of his territory. Anyone noticing the maths of the slaughter will note that this was a tenfold increase on the terror inflicted by his despotic father. Even for the Romans with their toleration of the cruelty meted out by Herod the father, this was too hard to stomach. Archelaus lasted less than ten years before he was replaced by a Roman Governor in AD6. His love of barbaric behaviour was damaging the stability of Judea. No wonder Joseph was afraid to settle in that part of the country. Matthew appears to hint that Joseph was minded to return to the Bethlehem area where Jesus was born once they returned from exile rather than go north to Galilee where their immediate family was living. Matthew does not tell us that Joseph and Mary were brought up in Nazareth, nor does he deny it. His focus is to stress the divine guidance which directed their paths. In essence Joseph and Mary were living examples of the truth of Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways submit to Him, and He will direct your paths.* Is that a promise you need to clam today concerning some area of your life? Is it an assurance you need to hear about the future of the work of this congregation as we go forward trusting Him to direct our pathway in the months and years to come?

(c) **The prophecy discerned by Matthew** (Matthew 2:23b) *So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that He would be called a Nazarene.* The precise wording Matthew uses here implies that he does not have a specific verse in mind –and this is factually true as there is no Old Testament verse with these specific words. What he appears to be saying is that the presence of this family back in Nazareth in Galilee was not the product of chance but within the providential care of God. At the human level then and now it appears that luck or chance plays a major part in many things that take place in our lives. Matthew wants to underline that this is not the case in reality. It was not true in the life of Jesus nor will it be true for us in this generation. Our lives are to be lived under God's guidance as we seek to discern how He would have practice our faith in this generation. In time we will see His leading, but often for a significant period of time we cannot discern how He wishes us to proceed. He calls us to trust and obey Him, because our future is kept safe in His hands. God's will, will be done. At the human level at time we cannot see beyond *Rachel weeping for her children* or whatever difficulty is strewn across our pathway. However, by faith may God help us to rise above our difficulties and declare our trust in Him and affirm together that God's will will be done, for Jesus' sake, Amen.