Christmas 1A Matthew 2: 13-end

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

So we’ve all been there, done that now. How are you feeling? Christmas is a time of joy. Of celebration. Of peace on earth. It is also, we are told, one of the most stressful occasions of the year – when families are forced (is that too strong a word?) together and obliged to get along somehow. I know ours has had its stresses this year, as well as its joy and celebration. You can’t have a disabled young adult who needs a great deal of physical care, a very old woman whose mental grasp of life is fragile, a sleep-deprived priest and a bunch of party-animals all in one house and expect it to be all sweetness and light….

Christmas has huge potential for joy, but we all undoubtedly know some who have found it in equal measure tricky too. That is reality.

So the birth of Jesus was indeed a day of celebration. A brilliant star hung overhead and the Magi saw it and set off on their journey. But something else that the birth of Jesus and today’s Christmas celebrations have in common is that both are short-lived.

The whole thing seems to happen all a bit too soon: this gospel reading comes too soon. We have just barely finished using up the last of the turkey leftovers – or maybe you haven’t even done that yet. Christmas Eve was full of little towns of Bethlehem and holy infants so tender and mild. We heard on Christmas morning Luke’s story of the young mother who gave birth to her first-born son in a stable, with only shepherds and animals for company. And it was totally a life-giving and hope-filled experience.

If you were employed as a lectionary-compiler, wouldn’t you have wanted to dwell just a little bit longer on the ‘light coming to cast out the darkness’ and ‘goodwill to all mankind’ stuff just a tiny bit longer? To wallow in the good news of the incarnation of Christ? To enjoy the baby?

Oddly, the bit immediately before the bit we heard this morning would have done just that: it was the story of the wise men’s journey to bring gifts to the new King. So we could have indulged in the new birthday celebrations a while longer.

But we weren’t allowed to. Today we have totally skipped the rest of the visitors to the baby and got to the bit we might rather forget: the slaughter of the Holy Innocents.

At the same time, though, the story for this week, though abrupt, jarring, and even harrowing, feels nonetheless oddly familiar and corresponds rather more closely than we would like to think to the world in which we live. This year, like others before it, has been full of violence and terror, of knife crime and hate-speech. Of unrest, divisions and tensions.

All of which make this reading chillingly timely. The horrors we are encountering on a daily basis are not new. (Nor were they new in Jesus’ day either, for that matter: Matthew’s story of Herod’s slaughter of the innocents deliberately reminds us of Pharaoh’s execution of Jewish children in the second chapter of the book of Exodus).

And that, I think, is part of Matthew’s point. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, and so the God we **meet** in Jesus is not exempt from the tensions, fears, violence, and horrors of our fallen and broken world. But in the birth of Jesus, the way that God embraces the most difficult parts of our story reminds us that this world is not only fallen but also beloved.

It is easy to think of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt as an isolated escape. A bit like we might see the von Trapp family trekking into Switzerland. But neither of them was alone. The Holy Family, like the von Trapps, were surrounded by other refugees doing the same thing: in this story of forced flight, God-in-Christ identifies with all those who have been driven from their homes by threat of terror, all who are displaced by violence and warfare, and all who flee in fear, hoping for, though with no guarantees, a better, brighter and more prosperous future.

When you think about it, Emmanuel – God-with-us – wouldn’t really mean all that much if it was only God-with-us in the nicest moments, in the times of celebration, at all the Christmas Eve services of our lives. Certainly, those moments of joy are gifts from God and it is right to give God thanks for them. But if we’re glad that God is with us in times of rejoicing, we also really want to know whether God is equally with us in times of grief, loss, fear and flight.

Just rewinding a bit, to fill in the gaps for those for whom this story is less-familiar, the historical context is this: not long after Jesus’ birth Joseph had another visitation from an angel, via a dream, and he was told by this angel to flee to Egypt to escape Herod’s latest plan. Herod was threatened by the arrival of a baby who was being hailed as a king, and ordered the killing of all first born boys aged 2 or younger in and around the Bethlehem area. We have no idea how many babies that affected, but it was a volatile situation, in which neighbour may well have been set against neighbour, not that much different from Nazi Germany.

The rulers of this world continue to make decisions about whether and how to accept refugees from all over the place. I cannot conceive that refugees would not on the whole rather be among their own friends and families, in cultures they know and love. But so many have to make the horrible choice that it’s safer to risk a journey into the unknown, to live in a refugee camp, than to stay where their children may not otherwise survive.

That makes this exactly the right time for us to consider the passage in Matthew where Jesus becomes, with his parents, a refugee. In a story that is as ancient as human culture and as modern as tomorrow’s news, they flee a tyrant who doesn’t care whether children live or die.

This first Sunday after Christmas, we’re not allowed to dwell on any nostalgic, lovely picture of a baby in a manger. This first Sunday after Christmas, we already have a weeping and suffering God.

In every newborn baby there is the promise of a future, yet also the spectre of danger, illness, evil. If this had not also been true for Jesus, then he would not have been truly one of us.

**Amen**