

THE AFTERMATH OF CHRISTMAS

Part 1: Matthew 2:13-23

The carpet is covered in boxes, and there is ripped paper, and presents strewn everywhere! Sweetie papers gather around the bin, not quite in it! The dinner table is covered in empty plates and glasses; the remnants of the turkey are in the kitchen, beside a plate of cold roast potatoes; the ice-cream is melted in the tub, most of it eaten, but this is what's left. People are slumped in front of the telly, half-watching something they don't really want to watch, but it's background noise while they sleep. The children are either playing with the toy they love best, or are sleeping on the couch having been up at 5am and are now exhausted! This is the aftermath of Christmas!

Yes, but not quite what I had in mind. There are 2 pieces to "The Aftermath", both of which lead us beyond the story of Christmas to what comes after. In the first part, what came next in the story; in the second part, where does this all lead?

What came next? Our critics tell us that the Bible lives in some kind of fantasy world and paints a picture of that fantasy world that just doesn't exist, created by some figment of our imagination in a world that is full of sweetness and light but is cut off from the real world in which sensible people live! Really! "Well then, Mr critic, come and read the second half of Matthew 2!". If the child in the manger story has an awww factor to it, then here's coming down to earth with a bump! The second part of Matthew 2 could be the headlines on the BBC news any time in the last two weeks! Here's Jesus in the real world of power politics, genocide, fear, people crossing borders looking for safety. The Son of God and a protected lifestyle? I don't think it worked that way!

At the centre of all of this is the figure of Herod. He really was ruthless. This particular episode is not recorded elsewhere, but Josephus, the contemporary historian records at least three other occasions when Herod killed potential rivals, including three of his own sons and their families. He was ruthless in the extreme; here, Jesus is his target because of the visit and testimony of the wise men; they were coming looking for a king and Herod will be the only king in town, as far as he is concerned! How many times... a Pakistani school 10 days ago? A Nigerian school earlier this year? Children have been the targets of ruthless people looking either to extract revenge on someone, in the Pakistan case, their parents for being soldiers; or to use children as political hostages, in the Nigerian case to try to persuade the Nigerian government to stop educating girls.

Joseph and Mary do what so many had done before and have done since; they run away. They become refugees. What is a refugee? A refugee is someone looking for shelter and protection from danger. At end of 2013 there were 16.7m refugees across the world, 16.7m people who had moved from their homes to go to live somewhere else because home was too dangerous, not safe anymore. Guided by God, this little family run away to Egypt: for them, like others of their family before them, Egypt is seen as a safe place and they stay there until the situation is changed, until the threat has gone away and they are free to go home. The go to Nazareth.

For Matthew, each of these three episodes is a marker along the way to show how Jesus is already completing the plan that God had set out in the Old Testament; each one is somehow completing a part of the message of the prophets of old. The last of these is the hardest to fathom: "Jesus the Nazarene" is nowhere actually a prophecy, but someone has suggested that since Nazareth was a humble, lowly place, then by

living in Nazareth, Jesus is completing all the prophets' pieces about a lowly King, and a humble messiah!

For me, each of these three pieces shows just how connected to the real world Jesus is. Jesus is the intended victim of genocide; Jesus is the refugee; Jesus is coming home and making a new life. These are not everyday experiences for all of us, but they are the experiences of so many people in our world; this is the 'place' so many people live, full of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety. Jesus is part of our world; Jesus' footprints on the planet are not all sweetness and light, but are full of so many of the real human emotions that we face. The aftermath of Christmas – we have a Saviour who has tasted the real world in all its goodness and in all its darkness. He is able to understand us when we pray, to listen to us, to answer us, because He has been here and knows how it feels at first hand.

Part 2: Hebrews 1:1-4

This week people have been marking ten years since the Boxing Day Tsunami; they have been going back to Thailand and lighting candles in memory of the people who died in that horrific event. It is a hundred years since the start of the First World War and there have been events to mark that and for the next four years we will remember these events and the people and we have said time and time again that these events should change the way in which we see the world and for a time they do, then we forget. In ten years time, will there be another remembering of the tsunami? We remember for a time, but then even if people pass on the story to their children, it will simply be a memory in a suitcase alongside all the other photos. For us as Christians, there is one set of events that stands year after year, the events around Jesus of Nazareth, Christmas and Easter events; we are still living in the aftermath of Christmas, in the aftermath of Jesus' coming and what Jesus did.

We read Hebrews 1:1-4, a summary of so many important things about Jesus; it tells us who He is and a little of what He's done and its there that I want to focus. "*After He...*" (*Hebrews 1:3*) Hebrews is a sermon directed at Christians from a Jewish background; it uses so many pictures and ideas from the Old Testament to tell them how much better Jesus is than anything they've known in the past. The preacher goes into some detail at some points, but the thrust of Hebrews is simple: "Jesus is greater..." What you've known, Jesus is better; what you've had before, Jesus is greater.

The Bible makes one thing very clear: it is not Bethlehem that makes Jesus the Saviour of the world; it's Calvary. It wasn't the birth of Jesus that was the most significant thing about Him, but His death and then His resurrection. Don't get me wrong: Bethlehem is hugely significant in what it tells us about who Jesus is, the Son of God made human etc, but it was only when the same Son of God humbled Himself, sacrificed Himself on the cross that this became salvation for the world. The aftermath of Christmas has to be Calvary, 33 yrs later, when Jesus was again the victim of power politics on the one hand and sacrificed Himself because He loved the world on the other. These two events are linked and connected in the mind of God and they need to be linked and connected in our minds and hearts too. It is great and happy to welcome the child at Bethlehem; it is great and humble to acknowledge the man on the cross; the same Jesus; the same Saviour.

"*He sat down...*" (*Hebrews 1:3*) Here is someone whose work is done; He sat down because He has finished the work that God gave Him to do. What was that work? "*After He...*" Sin contaminates everything. Sin gets in the way of even the best deeds, and the best motives at times. We do good things, but our motives can be

dodgy; we do bad things and we feel guilty of our wrong doing; sin contaminates and gets in everywhere, into every part of our human nature. That doesn't mean that everything we do is bad, but our whole human nature is affected by sin. This is why you will find so many rituals in religions across world that involve washing, washing hands, washing other parts of body, washing other things, baptism... why? They are symbolic of trying to clean away the contamination of sin. Jesus has done it! He has dealt with it; He has taken it away, when He died on the cross; so now there is forgiveness for us and the Spirit is at work in us to help clear up the debris. Jesus sat down, His work is done; He has provided forgiveness, purification, cleansing.

This is the aftermath of Christmas for us, the lasting aftermath that touches every day of our lives. The baby born in Bethlehem went on to be the man of Calvary and that man of Calvary did something for us that lives with us and in us every day of our lives; it has done for generations before us and it will live in generations still to come. Forgiveness, peace, hope, joy, love, grace, others – these are the blessings of God for us in Jesus; these blessings are the aftermath of Christmas for us every day. Open you hearts and let them in!