

Session 5: A future full of hope

Stillness

I come to this time of quiet prayer with a desire to be still and present to God. Perhaps my mind is racing, perhaps this feels like wasted time, when life is so busy. But I offer God the gift of this time and allow the minutes to flow by, without measuring or counting. Breathing in and out, I allow myself to rest in the moment. The reading for today's session is from the Gospel of Matthew.

Reading

(Matthew 2: 13-21)

Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod [...] When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.' When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Reflect

This is hardly a happy Christmas scene: refugees fleeing amid terror and destruction, children murdered by an oppressive ruler, homelessness and desolate mourning. Matthew's Gospel tells of Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. But this quotation from Jeremiah is a prophecy full of joy, hope and consolation. God says: 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work... there is hope for your future'. Every day our newspapers are full of violence and destruction, cruelty and death, racism and oppression of many kinds. It would be easy to despair, especially as we face an uncertain future. But in the midst of all this, God is with us, offering us a future full of hope. We ourselves can be part of that hope for the future of the world. If we allow ourselves to be led by the way of Jesus, sharing the faith and courage of Joseph and Mary, the trust of the shepherds and wise men, the welcome of Elizabeth and all the familiar figures of the Nativity, we will find ourselves making real the story of Christ's birth. This is the true Christmas

present – God’s gift to us, but also our gift to God. Christmas songs and carols sing of us wanting to bring a gift to Jesus in the manger. What can we bring but our willingness to have our hearts transformed by the wonderful generosity of God? God wants nothing more from us than that willingness so that his dream can be fulfilled of being God with us.

Talk to God

The Christmas story is full of journeys, both physical and spiritual. No one involved in the story of the Incarnation is left in the same place that they started from. God’s invitation waits for our response, but never leaves us standing. I may find myself shying away from the harder parts of the story – this is not the safe and happy Christmas of childhood. How do I react to the harsher parts of the narrative, where nothing feels safe or stable? I take time to get into the minds of Joseph and Mary as they pack up and escape, with horror following on behind them. Perhaps I talk to them or share in their conversation with each other. What does it feel like, to try and keep faith and hope alive in such a situation? What do I find myself wanting to say to God?

Jesus is so small and vulnerable. He escapes, while others die. I allow my thoughts to dwell on the many refugees and terrified children, the desperate families on our own borders right now, trying to find shelter and a new life. Have these Advent meditations changed the way I think of them? How do I see God with us in them?

Finally, I sit quietly and allow God to speak to me through the scriptures. Perhaps I can take time to find Jeremiah’s prophecy and share in Rachel’s joy, despite her weeping and desolation. How do these scripture passages speak to me in times of joy or of sadness? Are there joys and sorrows I want to share with God right now? Joseph is presented as a model of obedience, a word that means to listen attentively. How am I being called in my own life to listen attentively to God’s promises?