

EXILE AND REFUGE

Sermon for Christmas 2C: Mt 2:13-15, 19-23

LPC, 1/3/09

We all know the story of the wise men from the east who come to see the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, guided over thousands of miles by a star. American culture shmushes the story of the wise men into the Christmas story, but Americans are fairly unique in this, as well as biblically incorrect. In the Bible, the wise men and the shepherds never appear at the same time. As a matter of fact, the shepherds appear only in the Gospel of Luke, and the wise men appear only in the Gospel of Matthew.

In highlighting the three kings, Matthew has a different emphasis from Luke's. From Matthew's familiarity with Jewish language and custom, scholars assume that Matthew was probably a Jew before he was a Christian. From the fact that Matthew takes trouble to explain Jewish language and custom to his readers, scholars infer that some, at least, of Matthew's original audience were Gentile before they became Christian.

Matthew thus has a foot in two camps. First, he has a foot in the Jewish culture into which he was born. Secondly, he has a foot in the Gentile culture in which he ministers, at least in part. The story of the wise men reflects this dual outlook. The wise men, being Gentile, demonstrate that God is sending God's Son to all the world, not just to the Jews. The fact that these three non-Jews responded more quickly and more wholeheartedly to the cosmic announcement of the Messiah's birth is, to Matthew, significant.

At the same time, Matthew is thoroughly rooted in God's prophecies to the Jews. Matthew is particularly concerned to show how Jesus fulfills the prophecies that suffuse the Hebrew scriptures. Matthew also suggests parallels between Jesus' life and ministry, and that of Moses, the hero of the Hebrew scriptures and giver of the Law.

The story we hear in today's Gospel reading is a case in point. In today's story, the wise men have already been to and gone from the stable in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Our Sunday lessons are thus out of order, because it's not until January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, that the lessons will tell us about the wise men's arrival in Bethlehem, but never mind. Let's skip over that for the time being.

The wise men came to Judea guided by their star. As people of influence traveling with a large retinue, they had stopped in with the local king, Herod. This was customary at the time to assure the locals that their intentions were peaceful. Their intentions were indeed peaceful, but the news that they were seeking the newborn King of the Jews had a very unpeaceful effect on Herod, who saw this new king as a political threat. Herod, knowing that this rival king was still a baby, determined to remove the threat by killing all the babies in Bethlehem.

Now, if you know the Book of Exodus, which tells the story of Moses, this is where things should start to sound familiar. At the time that Moses was born, in Egypt,

the King of Egypt, feeling threatened by the proliferation of Hebrews in his kingdom, ordered that all the Hebrew boy babies be put to death. To save her son, Moses' mother put him in a floating cradle and sent him off to be discovered by Pharaoh's daughter. Remember that?

Just as Moses was saved from infantile genocide, so, we hear today, was Jesus. This time it is the baby's father (stepfather, if you prefer) who, being warned by an angel, takes his little family beyond the king's murderous reach.

And where does he take them? Egypt of course! Once again we are struck by the parallel with Moses. Moses and his people lived in exile in Egypt. Jesus also was taken into exile in Egypt. In case we have missed the Old Testament connection, Matthew provides one: "This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son.'"

So what? What does this mean to us? For myself, I am struck by the theme of exile. Here Jesus, while still an infant, is already forced into exile.

The theme of exile is a recurring one in the Bible. The Bible makes it clear that following the Lord often puts a person at odds with the status quo. Biblical heroes like Abraham and Jeremiah have to uproot themselves in order to follow God's call on their lives. When they speak for God, they are unappreciated and persecuted. In this respect, Jesus is just one example among many.

The recurring biblical theme of exile implies that if we too are being true to God's call on our lives, we can't expect to be supported by the status quo. If our religious convictions are compatible in every way with cultural assumptions and popular values, those convictions may not be entirely godly.

The good news is for when we find ourselves exiled: out of place in our own place and time. When our faith leads us to places where we find ourselves isolated and on unfamiliar ground, we know we are not alone. Christ has been here before us.

There is another side to the concept of exile, as presented by Jesus' early exile in Egypt. The other side of being in exile is refuge. By going into exile in Egypt, Jesus found himself a temporary refuge. Likewise, when we find ourselves isolated and exiled, we too may consider ourselves in a place of temporary refuge – a place of safety in which to wait out the storm before returning home to begin a new ministry or continue the old one.

To be in exile is also to have found temporary refuge. When we feel ourselves exiled, on the outside, at sea, uncertain, we can remember the exiled infant Jesus and look upon our place of exile as a place of God's special protection: a place of waiting and watching, and listening for God's guidance. It will come. Jesus comes to liberate God's people from exile as surely as Moses before him.