

Christmas II, 2011, A

I have this bumper sticker that we picked up at the Diocesan Convention that reads “Peace is the Church’s Business”. Oddly enough, two of the three days following the celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace, commemorate the violent deaths of innocent people. On December 26 we remember St. Stephen, the first martyr for the Christian faith. He was stoned to death in Jerusalem following Pentecost, with those who executed him throwing their cloaks at the feet of who would become known as the Apostle Paul. On December 28th we remember the Holy Innocents, the innocent children who King Herod murders in an attempt to kill Jesus shortly after his birth. This is the persecution that the angel warns Joseph about in the dream in today’s story from Matthew’s gospel, prompting Joseph to take the child to Egypt until after Herod is dead.

Christmas seems to be about peace and hope of God which takes place in the midst of a world in which violence is perpetrated on innocent people. Recent images in the world news show this is still the current reality. At least 21 people are killed in the bombing of a Coptic Christian Church in Alexandria, Egypt. This event followed the bombings and violent attacks which claimed the lives of more than 80 Christians in Nigeria and the Philippines on Christmas Eve. In Iraq, the attacks on Christian Churches has been a regular occurrence for years and has caused many of the Christians to flee. Politicians as well as religious leaders have all spoken out condemning the violence. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams urged people to remember those facing persecution because of their Christian faith. *“We may feel powerless to help; yet we should also know that people in such circumstances are strengthened simply by knowing they have not been forgotten.”*

It would seem that the story which I related on Christmas Eve illustrates this very situation and might bear repeating. The story was about a man who was searching for an artistic representation of peace

and hope. After many different pieces, he finally settled on a painting that showed a the violence of a waterfall during the onset of the dark clouds, thunder and lightning of a thunderstorm. In the midst of this tumultuous scene, a bird had built a nest in the crook of a straggly tree which had grown out over the waterfall. As the violence threatened around the nest, the bird sat with her wings covering the eggs and her eyes closed in a posture of perfect peace and hope. Peace is the Church's business and we still have a lot of work to do!

The main character in today's Gospel reading is Joseph, who is not even mentioned in Mark's gospel, nor in John's. He is only mentioned on two occasions in passing in Luke's gospel. How many of us in the Church are Josephs, not remembered by most as one of the spiritual giants, but still had an important role to play? In Matthew's gospel begins, Joseph plays a primary role in listening to and responding to spiritual messages, in order to provide for the infant Jesus in Egypt, so he can return to Israel as the "new Moses".

A new Moses, Jesus is saved from Herod's murdering of the innocent children by Joseph's swift action, just as Moses was saved from Pharaoh's killing of the Jewish children. There are other connections. *Moses is the bearer of the message of God – the Torah on Mount Sinai.* In Matthew's gospel *Jesus is the incarnation of the message of God – the Gospel, which he makes clear in the Sermon on the Mount.* Joseph follows where God leads, managing what resources he has, (like his namesake in Genesis) to provide, protect and sustain this innocent Holy Family in Egypt and as they settle in Nazareth. The Holy family were "innocents", "non-combatants". They had not asked for the risky life, they simply were trying to be faithful in what they heard God's call for them to be.

What is our role in this faith story? Most of us, like Joseph, will not be remembered as having a primary role in the larger story. Yet, from one perspective, perhaps someone like the evangelist of Matthew, will remember the importance of a humble act of

faithfulness, like the one Joseph did. I have spoken at hundreds of funerals over the years, and many people are remembered by a few in a very special way for some very special reasons, *being a faithful person there at a “right time” to make a big difference!* In one sense we can never predict what the result of our faithful actions might be in the larger picture.

In Ephesians we read today about a “hope to which God has called us”. That hope points us to believe in beyond what we can see, beyond what we would normally expect. The reading talks about the faithful knowing the “riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.” What riches are these? My experience is that God’s riches are always for a purpose far greater than one’s own comfort, it is capital to be invested, used, producing 4 fold, 7 fold. The riches of our inheritance among the saints provides food to feed the hungry, a means to provide for the poor. One of our riches acting together as koinonia, fellowship, a common work in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Ephesians wants us to know the “immeasurable greatness of his power working in us”. Our connection “encourages” one another and provides hope to those in the world around us with whom we come into contact. This is God’s power working in us!

What are the greatest threats to our works in faith today? In the Middle East, Africa and Asia the greatest threat is violence and fear. Yet, I think the greatest threat to our work of faith is complacency, a complacency that is bred by routine, convenience and comfort. As we pray for the innocent faithful who are enduring such violence, no doubt we will find opportunities in our life to act in faith and the spiritual empowerment to pursue justice. Without justice, peace is always transient and justice is never comfortable or convenient. As Joseph reminds us, the journey begins within ourselves and our own community, as little and as weak as a Holy family might seem to be. We really don’t know how our acts of faithfulness will impact the larger story, but our actions will always be remembered, they will never be disregarded by the God who has called us!