

Suffering at the Heart of Christmas
Hebrews 2:10-18
December 29, 2019

I'm sure that we all received many beautiful Christmas cards over the past few weeks. We would have no doubt seen lots of peaceful, almost surreal pictures of the holy family tucked away in a lovely manger with animals. Perhaps there were angels or wise men or shepherds, or lovely snow scenes with happy deer prancing ahead of sleds. The Christmas card makers are not stupid; they are hardly likely to put the scene from our reading today on their card, the massacre of the innocents. All the lovely children under two brutally killed by Herod's henchmen does not a peaceful, sentimental Christmas card make. The Christmas reality show, if it were to be produced back in Herod's day, would have to be X-rated because of the extreme violence throughout.

Just over forty years ago an artist associated with the 'Catholic Monthly' published a disturbing depiction of the nativity scene. In the centre lies the babe on hay and nestled around him are the usual adoring animals. High above through the crossbeams a star can be seen shining into the stable. Has he been commissioned by Hallmark, you might ask, for it has all the ingredients of a conventional Christmas card? But wait for it! A closer look through the archway reveals a village off on the edge of the frame. But this is not the cozy skyline of a traditional card. Instead one sees a bombed-out city in flames and it looks like the theatre of war is moving toward the stable. The baby is born in a year, like most years, of war and violence. This, my friends, is an accurate biblical portrait, true then and true today for millions of people. No sooner had the baby Jesus cried his first tears that his parents had to whisk him off to Egypt to escape the violence of Herod.

Bill Kellermann argues in his book, **Seasons of Faith and Conscience**, that the pastoral scenes of our Hallmark cards render the Christmas story flat and frozen. He goes on to say that the incarnation is certainly a still point in the centre of history, the presence of eternity in a moment in time. Nevertheless, it is also a point in the centre of a:

furiously turning world, very nearly the eye of a hurricane, which implicates cosmic portents, the powers of history, forces marshaled and moving, threats and intrigues, journeys and exiles, and raging political violence. In the conventional manger scene, these are pushed off the edge of the frame, out of sight and mind. (Kellermann, p.141)

Our Hebrews passage is a powerful reminder that Christ's incarnation as the babe in the manger was anything but idyllic. *Veiled in flesh the Godhead see*, sings the popular Carol. Indeed, the presence of God in the form of a baby surely shook the foundations of the galaxies. Our poverty of language is felt acutely as we try to wrap words around this mystery, this glorious, impossibly amazing and incomprehensible event that reduces us to awe and silence. God enters our flesh, our time, our space and learns obedience through his suffering. How can God suffer, some may ask, since God is infinite, beyond time and space and a Spirit. In his Son Jesus God surely suffers.

Watching the infamous **Matrix** films again recently I was reminded of just how awesome this downward plunge of God into our vulnerable flesh truly is. The biblical themes are everywhere present in this popular science fiction depiction of the war between the forces of darkness and light. The dark lord of the machine world enters into the body of a human in one last attempt to defeat the redeemer of the human race, Neil by name. Locked in deadly combat with Neil the dark lord tells him that being encased in human flesh was truly a terrible experience, with all its limitations and weakness. He says of this flesh, *how pathetically fragile it is; nothing this weak is meant to survive.*

And yet it was into this fragility and vulnerability that God decided to enter in order to redeem the human race from its sin. This in itself must have been suffering for our Lord. But added to this was the suffering he endured both as a human being and as God incarnate.

Think of this as we read the Hebrews passage: ***Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil... (Hebrews 2:14)***

The famous Philippians' passage speaks of this giving up of our Lord's heavenly identity to assume the form of a servant:

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

These passages remind us that God risked everything to enter creation incognito. Renouncing control and absolute power God opens the door to become vulnerable as a human bound by space and time.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, tells us a little bit of what she must have been like. She knew how momentous her decision was to agree to this baby. Mary is depicted in Revelation chapter 12 with a crown of twelve stars, surely here representing the tribes of Israel. Here is Mary and Israel crying out for deliverance and struggling to give birth to a Saviour. The dragon (the devil) also hears and waits to pounce. The woman looks this power in the eye and bears her child. Listen to the words of Revelation:

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. ³Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. (Rev 12:1ff)

The power represented by the dragon is of course Caesar. Caesar who thinks he is the main character in the story, the ruler of the world. Herod represents him in Israel and sits uncomfortably upon his throne, paranoid and brutal. Both these rulers stand for the worldly powers whose military ruthlessness and barbarity have won power

over all their enemies. Caesar, like Herod, sits uneasily, ready to devour the slightest threat to Roman power.

Yes, the woman and the dragon are a great sign, the same word used by Mary in her song which says that *this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel*...John tells us that many in Israel didn't recognize him. Do we who have waited throughout Advent, who have perhaps too easily been lulled to sleep by our conventional portrait of the Christmas nativity scene, have we missed the point? The battle is between the forces of evil, here depicted by the dragon, and the child, who is set for the fall and rising of many. This is the genuine setting for the birth. The artist had it right. This is a battle scene, not a pastoral scene. It is the white-hot centre of God's engagement with sin and death and hell. Perhaps the massacre of the innocents is not so inappropriate for a Christmas scene after all. And I'm sure the millions of children, woman and men who over this past while have been victims of empire and the dragon's work will attest that it is so.

Amen