

Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's Wimbledon, 1st Sunday after Christmas, 1st January 2017.

Matthew's account of the Holy family's flight into Egypt, following King Herod's threat to search for Jesus and kill him, seems like a modern adventure story. 2016 brought us horrific pictures of families fleeing from persecution or intolerable conditions. Families wanting to escape to a new life left their homes and risked their lives in flimsy boats in the Mediterranean Sea.

Herod's violence, and that of the Roman Empire, is certainly matched by the violence in today's world, 2000 years later. We could despair if we thought that was the end of the story but thankfully we know that it is not.

The amazing account, in Matthew's Gospel, of Jesus's conception, birth and his protection by Joseph; escaping with his family into Egypt, seems a very odd way for God to fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament. As I said on Christmas Day, '*God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.*'

Matthew sees Jesus as the new Moses. Robert Jeffrey in his commentary on our Gospel passage helps us understand this concept. (1) Both Moses and Jesus are rescued from slaughter and live in Egypt. Jesus' life was threatened by King Herod as Moses' life was threatened by Pharaoh. Both Jesus and Moses fast for 40 days. The Sermon on the Mount is a new version of the 10 Commandments. Whereas Moses issues the Torah, Jesus became the great interpreter of the law and its fulfilment. Jesus' life like Moses was protected. After King Herod dies Joseph again is warned in a dream to leave Egypt and go with Mary and Jesus and they travel to the Nazareth in Galilee.

Isn't it strange that all important messages about special tasks that need to be carried out seemed to be conveyed by God to the recipients in dreams and by angels? We probably underrate dreams today and may be quite sceptical about the role of angels!

To prepare for his future ministry Jesus was called to go out from the safety and protection of his parental home, to go out into the wilderness. He fasted 40 days to prepare himself. As Jesus worked to fulfil the mission God had given him, he faced criticism, opposition and even was misunderstood by his own disciples. He even sacrificed his own life and met the death of a common criminal, but conquered death by his glorious Resurrection from the dead.

At the start of 2017, we too here at St Mary's, are called to come out of our comfort zone and perhaps have a time in the wilderness to prepare ourselves for what lies ahead. Lent is a good time to do this. However some of you may have already had your wilderness experience in 2016. After the wilderness comes a time for new life and new growth and it would be good to reflect on this during Lent. I am hoping to lead a Quiet Day during Lent reflecting on the theme '*From Wilderness to New Life*'

In this country we are not likely to be persecuted for being a Christian, we are more likely to meet apathy. But this is not so for many Christians around the world. e.g. in

Mosel in Irac there are only about two dozen Christians today but before Isis conquered Mosul about 35,000 Christians lived there. These persecuted Iraci Christians could certainly identify with the exile of Moses in Egypt and Jesus and his family fleeing from Herod's violence. We need to give thanks for our freedom of worship in Great Britain and not just take it for granted. We are called to tell people of the good news of Jesus.

Let us use this freedom to help people find meaning in their lives in 2017. Perhaps you, like me, have had people saying to you, '*Christmas is for children; what is all the fuss about, all this preparation and then it's over in two days.*' But of course it's not. Christmas last 12 days and we haven't even got to the Feast of the Epiphany on 6th January !

If we have Jesus the Christ at the centre of our Christmas celebrations what a meaning Christmas gives to the New Year. Having celebrated the birth of the promised Messiah, a Messiah who brings hope and healing to all people, we carry that message with us for the rest of the year. Even in our darkest hour we know that the power of Jesus brings love and light to shine in the dark places of the world.

On this New Year's Day let us give thanks for the all that was good in 2016 and hand over to God the burdens that we have carried. Let us offer to God the start of this New Year that and ask that God may give us strength to face the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for us.

On this this New Year's day let us pray that this church of St. Mary may be a beacon of light ,and a place of hope, for all who step through its doors in 2017. **Amen.**

- (1) Robert Jeffrey of Cowley Oxford writing in the series of *Sermons for the Christian Year, in the Expository Times*, for 1st January: New Year's Day, *Matthew 2. 13-23*