

## Sunday Evening 30th December 2012- Kenneth Gray, Matthew 2:13-18 "Escape"

In recalling his first Christmas season in Freeland some 25 years ago, Kenneth remembered the very sad and difficult funeral of a child, one of twins, he had had to deal with. Even more than the family's fortitude in their grief he remembered that these verses from Matthew were read during the funeral service and, in a remarkable way, brought comfort to the bereaved parents. Some years later they had commented that these words and the loss of their child had helped them better understand Christ's incarnation and the wonder of God's gift of his Son to live among us – even though he knew what would befall Jesus 33 years later.

So often at Christmas we can be distracted by the decorations and the festivities and fail to ponder the depth of the incarnation's theological significance.

Thinking of Joseph's immediate compliance with God's commands Kenneth also recalled how, some years ago, a speaker at an SU camp had opened his talk to a group of young people exploring the Christian faith with the words "*Before I became a Christian I had no problems!*" He had gone on to recount that his non-believing family had disapproved of his conversion and relationships with them had become difficult. He had also suddenly found himself on the wrong educational track for the new career path he now wished to follow and he was forced to take 2 years out before he could switch his educational route. This speaker's message was that following Christ was no guarantee of bliss in this life.

So it was for Joseph. If he had been invited to describe the results of accepting Jesus into his life Joseph too might have begun by saying "Before I became a Christian I had no problems!" In a previous study we considered Joseph's first dilemma – whether to believe the message, delivered in a dream, that Mary's child had been conceived of the Spirit. Then followed the challenges surrounding finding a place for the child to be born. The child is then born and is named Jesus as instructed. No sooner have the Magi left than Joseph is told, again in a dream, to flee to Egypt immediately – 'during the night' - to protect the child from Herod's wrath. As far as we know Joseph was an ordinary man doing an ordinary job, but God called him to undertake an extraordinary and momentous task. Joseph's response is immediate and unhesitating.

How many of us would have responded with such unquestioning alacrity? If Joseph had been like so many other men would he not have looked on Mary with resentment for getting him into these challenging and dangerous situations?

God often uses ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things. Looking around our own congregation Kenneth observed that here too can be found so many ordinary people through whom God is powerfully working. **We must never forget that there are some people who will only be reached through us** – the people we meet and have dealings with in our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our family and acquaintanceships. They are all as important to God as any of us.

Joseph's example shows us that when we accept Jesus our lives are no longer our own but His. Are we prepared to respond so willingly to God's call to action? How often do we drop everything and follow some prompting by the Lord, for example to visit someone who needs company or practical help? The Church needs more of Joseph's kind of responsiveness.

This passage tells us nothing about what life in Egypt was like for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. We do not need to know about this. We do know that they remained there until Herod died and it was safe to return thus fulfilling the prophesy found in Hosea 11. Christ's incarnation indeed fulfills scores of Old Testament prophesies.

Now Herod is consumed with rage not because of the birth of the Messiah but because his pride has been hurt when the Magi have outwitted him. The Evil One exploits our human nature if we are not vigilant. We can see this even in the church when people fall out – often over some matter of wounded pride or failure to get their own way rather than over significant theological differences. Herod's rage is incontinent.

Hundreds of families suffer the loss of their children as Herod's soldiers slaughter them in obedience to his merciless edict. The Evil One has Herod in his grasp and his work, as so often happens, is indiscriminate. Satan cannot overcome God's will but strives to undermine it however he can.

However, when everything seems to be going wrong is frequently the time when God channels his blessings. Kenneth, looking forward to 2013 when Freeland will be marking its 275th anniversary, observed that Freeland Church was probably at its strongest when its congregation was worshipping in a field. It took that early church family 6 years to be able to choose its own minister but it persevered and attained that right, grew and flourished, achieving great things in God's name.

Reading this passage from Matthew we know that out of this flight to Egypt good will come to pass and God's blessings will be poured upon an undeserving world.