



## ***Some Theological Perspectives on the Church's Role in Social Justice. Reflections on Matthew 2: 12-23***

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In the Christmas season, when we read the story of the incarnation, emphasis on the joy of Christmas means that we tend to gloss over the stark horror of the story of the slaughter of the innocents and the flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-23), and therefore miss its implications for the mission of God and the mission of the Church.

The story is terrifying. It is as if there was a moment in history when the future of the whole cosmos hung by a mere thread.

On one hand we have Herod - the king who built the Jews a magnificent temple. The king who did not hesitate to depose or slaughter High Priests. The king who killed members of his own family when he became suspicious of their ambitions. The king who did not hesitate to use all the brutal political and military force at his disposal to protect his power - at whatever price to his subjects.

Whatever the real purpose of God in Christ, this king will interpret the Christ, even as a small child, as a threat to his throne and his power.

He represents the worst of humankind. While there are some people who are obviously like Herod today, many of our Herods are less obvious, more subtle. But they exist - the people who use their power for their own sake and against everyone they perceive as a threat.

To protect the child, we have a young man, probably only fourteen. His wife has produced a child not his. He has agreed to care for that child. It seemed all right at the time - an act of faith and graciousness. The angel had said: Go home; don't be afraid. This child is God's child and will be Saviour.

Suddenly the rules have changed. The angel who said "Go home!" now says "Flee!" For a child not his own, Joseph has to uproot himself and flee before the wrath, and the army, of Herod, into another land. He becomes a refugee.

God entered into human life in the baby Jesus. In doing so, God voluntarily entered into a situation of total vulnerability to the worst that humankind can do, whether through evil, or through fear.

Against intentional, vicious evil, the only protection is Joseph and his faith. Who would blame Joseph if he had decided not to uproot himself, not to put himself at risk for a child who was not his? How much fear should one person take on?

God's mission in the world is first and foremost to be present in situations where human beings are most vulnerable. In the Old Testament, God had been the God who came to the Hebrews when they were slaves in Egypt. God challenged and defeated the gods of Egypt. God defeated the political, economic, and military powers. God established,

through the exodus and at Mt Sinai, Israel as an alternative community to Egypt - a community based on freedom and human rights.

In the flight and return from Egypt, God in the infant Jesus enters and lives this and other experiences of God's people through the ages. God undertakes a nightmare journey of solidarity with struggling and suffering people.

Matthew deliberately uses this story of the flight to Egypt as a way of linking the Christ, the Son of God, to the past experiences of Israel. To understand the Christ and his mission, we must look to the past experiences of Israel's vulnerability and rescue from an evil social order.

The God who comes into the world in Jesus is the God who is both totally vulnerable, and yet a challenge to all evil use of human power - a challenge to all evil economic and political systems.

And the future of God's mission in the world rests in one person's hands - Joseph's. He cannot fight soldiers; he cannot confront Herod. He has no grandiose plan. His act of faith is, superficially, almost an act of cowardice - he runs. But in fleeing he saves the child, and in saving the child Jesus, he shows total defiance of the evil which is embodied in Herod. He has done the one thing in his human power, and it is enough. God's mission is saved.

If this seems to be pushing this story a little too far, let's place its wider context in Matthew's Gospel.

Some Theological Perspectives on the Church's Role in Social Justice. Reflections on Matthew 2: 12-23 The story of the temptations (Matthew 4:1-11) is the story of the struggle of Jesus with alternative ways of being king. Jesus struggles with

- the temptation to turn stones to bread.
- the temptation to throw himself from the parapet of the temple.
- the temptation to do homage to the devil in return for the kingdoms of this world.

Who will Jesus be, as Messiah, king? Will he bribe people with bread? Will he reject his human vulnerability and insist that God protect him even in an act of total foolishness? Will he recognise that evil has power in this world and grant that power some legitimacy by doing it homage?

What is redemption? Is it to look after people for the sake of having power over them? Is it to hope for some sort of superhuman intervention in the world, to expect that God will save human beings from their plunge into suicide when they go against all the laws of normal interaction of humankind and the world? Is it to "be realistic" and compromise, cooperating with the powers of evil in the hope that they will grant us a share in power so that it we may use it benevolently, "to the glory of God"?

Particularly in the third temptation - when the Devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world - Jesus has to choose between being a king like Herod, and being a vulnerable human being who remains in solidarity with the powerless. He makes that choice, and pursues it even to death on the cross. It is in Matthew's gospel that we are told he was mocked on the cross as king of Israel - he saved others, but cannot save himself - and experienced total God-forsakeness (Matthew 27:39-50).

Towards the end of Matthew's Gospel, it becomes clear that the call to discipleship is a call to make the same choice, to share in the same mission. In the description of the final judgement (Matthew 25: 31-46), when the nations are gathered before the King, the test of faithfulness is whether one has shared one's being and one's goods with the most vulnerable people of the world. And the justification for the judgement is not some legalistic demand - it is the fact that the Christ is always present among those people - those without food, clothes, shelter, those in prison. The call to discipleship is a call to solidarity, but it is also a call to joyfully recognise the Christ who is present in this world, in its most dangerous, hopeless and difficult situations.

The church's social justice work is not a matter of Christian duty, nor is it a matter of playing political games for our own ends. Christian social justice action is:

- a response to the Gospel, a response to the Christ in whom we find our salvation.
- an opportunity to share in God's mission
- a response to the Christmas story, the story of the incarnation, the story of God entering into human life where it was most exposed to evil political power
- a response to the hope of the Gospel, that the Herods of this world are not the final power
- an act of discipleship, in which we go into situations which may disturb us, frighten us, challenge us, knowing the Gospel that the Christ is already there, before us.
- an act of vulnerability, in which we, like God in Christ, will have to take risks
- an identification with people who suffer the worst that human economic and political systems do to people
- a commitment to do whatever is within our power, and as much as is within our power
- rational activity, not grandiose gestures - the child Christ would not have lived if Joseph had tried some grand gesture of standing at his front door and forbidding the soldiers to enter
- a commitment to reject the opportunity to have power over people, and to find ways of empowering people so that they have choices, they make decisions
- a commitment to sharing our resources, as individuals and as an institution
- the living of an alternative way, alternative values, alternative methods, alternative relationships, alternative understandings of power

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