

First Sunday of Christmas

BLESSED BLOODINESS

Matthew 2:13-23

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' 21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23

There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

DIAGNOSIS: Attacking the Tyrant

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Wrack, Ruin, and Waste*

The tyrant pounces, the babies die, the mothers wail. Horrible, horrible, horrible, not least because it was and continues to be the same old news. In a famous phrase, slightly modified, sic semper tyranni – tyrants are ever thus. Or as Matthew might put it, those tyrants are with us always, to the close of the age (cf. 28:20), their ravages uninterrupted by the birth of a baby named "The LORD saves" (1: 21). Indeed the birth of that baby merely aggravates them. So does the birth of faith in that babe, as the history of the persecuted Church loudly testifies. See accounts this very month of Christians fleeing Iraq in droves.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Consternation*

This raises dark questions. Why the fuss over Christmas when such obscene evil rages on? What use is this birth when it maddens the beast instead of taming it? More darkly still, what game is God playing? We, the pious, assume much about him: that he's in control; that he "protects...in time of danger and guards...from every evil" (Luther's Small Catechism); that he hears the prayers of the lowly and champions the cause of the weak and small. Did we draw these assumptions from thin air? To the contrary, we got them from God's own prophets and poets. Note, for example, their testimony in today's accompanying readings (Isaiah 63:7-9, Psalm 148) to God's gracious and praiseworthy acts on his people's behalf. "He became their savior," they say, "in all their distress" (Is. 63: 8-9). But

when mothers keen over butchered babies, who can credit such stuff, or trust the God it claims to describe?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Lined up with Herod*
Worse, who can keep from judging this God and finding him evil? The story before us begs such judgment. Knowing what's coming God warns Joseph, guardian of his own child (v. 13). Are angels and dreams so scarce that he can't warn the other fathers too? The pious will object, perhaps, that the other babies have got to be on hand when the killing squads arrive so that Herod is thrown off the track. But this is frivolous. Would the pious likewise defend that proverbial Russian nobleman who, pursued by wolves, throws the peasant's child from the sleigh to save his own? And if the pious knew and believed that this nobleman was a god-like someone with whom "all things are possible" (19:26), would they not be impelled to lead the prosecution? Notice then how this story draws us strangely into Herod's orbit. He hates and despises God; suddenly, so do we. And we remember our loathing whenever we hear of tyrants getting fat on babies' blood while the Ultimate Tyrant stands meekly by. See Psalm 137. Think Auschwitz; Rwanda; or, on a micro-scale, the American toddler beaten to death by its drug-addled parent. Where, oh where, is the end to all this? Sic semper tyrannus (sing.), to the close of the age. Who being wise can bear to worship him?

PROGNOSIS: Adoring the Tyrant

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Aligned with Christ*

Then again, at whom is worship directed in Matthew's Gospel? Not at God per se but at his child and the man the child becomes (2:11, 8:2, 9:18, 14:33, 15:25, 20:20, 28:9, 28:17, where the common Gk. verb is *proskuneo*). And why not? Here at last is one who does use his enormous authority (9:6) to quell lesser tyrants: the devil (4:11), disease (8:3), death (9:25), the

devil's minions (9:33), the raging winds (14:33). Meanwhile he urges us persistently to trust the One he calls Father, inviting us to call him that too (6:25-34, 10:29-31, 18:12-14; and elsewhere). To that end he lets himself at last be crucified, the Son of Man (humanity's epitome, that is) suffering in his own person the strange passivity of the God whose fatherly love he has touted. In that dying scream of his that splits the sky (27:46) shall we not hear the wails of Bethlehem and every other place where butchers rage unchecked? And after he dies, is there not a strange and somehow healing satisfaction when the small "t" tyrant's goons remind us that this time it was the Tyrant's own kid who got it in the neck, in his hands and feet as well (27:54)? And when God, raising Jesus from the dead, puts ultimate authority in his scarred hands (28:18), shall we wonder still about the fate of all those other slaughtered children? "Teach them," Jesus says, "to observe all that I have commanded you" (28:19), of which lesson number one is Trust the Tyrant. No wonder disciples worshiped him (28:17). Made wise by Easter, what else could they do?

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Consolation*

So it is that God becomes our savior in this particular distress (Isa. 63:8-9). Understand him we cannot, not in this age. Even so, trust him we may, on his Son's account-this Jesus furnishing in his own slaughtered-and-resurrected person the evidence that God's purposes, while driving through death, lead finally to life. Come to think of it, isn't this why prophets sing their hopes and poets their praises? It's not that death, the tool of tyrants, isn't used by God as well. Instead they recognize and trust that where tyrants kill, God makes alive, all the more when the killing, as at Bethlehem, has somehow served God's life-giving aims. "Blessed are those who mourn," says Jesus. "They shall be comforted" (5:4). This, famously, is the second sentence of his first Matthean sermon. In announcing this so

soon, is he remembering his debt to Rachel and her Bethlehem daughters (v. 18)? If so, he's promising them the consolation that Jeremiah (v. 17) doesn't foresee. And for any others who dare amid dark questions to bank on Jesus' Easter and the God who delivers it, consolation starts now.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Wrack, Ruin and Witness*

God grant that faith and consolation to his saints in Iraq and wherever else the tyrants are hunting down God's Christ this month to kill him. These saints are in good and noble company. Martyrs, we call them, their witness (Gk: martyria) rendered not in words but in blood and tears. Yes, God lets it happen. He also keeps their sorrow from going to waste. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church," said Tertullian in the early 200s, his comment applying not only to what he saw but to what others since have seen, over and over. The Martyr in Chief puts it this way: "Blessed are you when people persecute you; your reward in heaven is great" (5:11-12), and "Let your light so shine that others may see your good works, [sanguinary ones included,] and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:16). In other words, "Follow my lead." And why not? If tyrants are with us always to the close of the age, all the more is God our Savior, Jesus is his name (28:20). Sic semper Tyrannus (sing.), consoling, forgiving, restoring to life. Good news indeed!