

# Sermon: EXODUS done again

## Matthew 2:13-23

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Christmas is the feast of a sweet baby born in Bethlehem; of angels praising God; of shepherds going into the world to tell people of the birth of the Messiah; of magi from the East worshipping the newborn king. Joseph and Mary must have been elated! "God is really blessing us with wonderful events. He even blessed them with previous presents from these magi."

What a blessings around that first Christmas night! When the magi had left and the room was quiet again, Joseph looked at the gold, the myrrh and the incense, he hugged Mary, he kissed the son of Mary, and he tried to sleep.

"Never again in a stable, from now on God blesses us, even financially!" I can imagine Joseph to have had this idea. 'Only the best for my wife and her child! For us and for our child, only five star hotels are good enough!'"

### Reversal of the exodus

Yeah. As soon as Joseph sleeps, after the magi have gone, an angel appears in a dream to Joseph. The angels had sung of peace on earth, but Herod, the king of the Jews, wants to kill the baby. So escape Joseph, escape.

Joseph and Mary and Jesus became refugees and ran for their lives to Egypt. According to the Coptic traditions, they even came close to us, in Matareya, the ancient city of Heliopolis, where they found refuge for a while.

They came to Egypt just as our Sudanese church members have escaped from dangers in Sudan, to become part of the pool of refugees, that sea of economic and social and psychological misery.

St Matthew, the writer of the Gospel we read from this morning, would later cite Jesus when speaking about the final judgment:

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' [...] 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

Jesus himself was a refugee, and he makes our treatment of our brothers and sisters in similar circumstances a symbol of how we appreciate Jesus himself. This should really make us think deep of how we treat any refugees and underprivileged in our world of injustice and wars.

In Sunday school for children we can tell the story of the escape of Jesus to Egypt as a story of Gods providence, or we focus on the fact that from the beginning of his life, the direction was toward suffering, toward the cross.

But Mathew is a theologian and he has a special way of telling the story that teaches us another important lesson. But for this, we have to read the story through the eyes of ancient Israel, and through the lens of the Old Testament.

A few key-words in the passage of the flight to Egypt are, Egypt, the killing of sons, rise, flee, by night, and the words: 'Out of Egypt I have called my son...'

What do these words reminds you of?

Yes indeed, the exodus. For Jewish ears who heard this gospel story of Mathew, Mathew made major allusions to the Exodus of Moses and Israel from Egypt. Israel was told by God to be ready and to escape in the night to Egypt. When Jewish people, even today, remember the Exodus, they stand around the table, re-enacting the readiness of Israel to escape from Egypt.

This is how Jesus escaped from Israel, to find security in Egypt. A total reversal of the ancient Exodus story, and therefore, shocking to Israel.

Herod is portrayed as pharaoh, who killed the firstborn sons of Israel. Eventually, when Herod had died, the Holy Family could return to their land, but even then, they went to Galilee. Not to the Jewish heartland, because that was too dangerous. They went to Galilee, a province that was seen by the pious Jewish as beyond the pale. It was so full of non-Jews, that many of them avoided the area as if it was 'abroad', a no-go zone.

The Jews escaped from Egypt, you recall the old story, with the gold and silver of the Egyptians. They received money for the journey, and for building their tabernacle. Just as Jesus received precious gifts from the magi to travel.

What Matthew paints here before our eyes, is a story dense with meaning - he describes a reversal of the Exodus of Israel.

God saved his nation from Egypt, many centuries before, so that they would live for God in their new land. They messed up so badly that even when God send his own Son, God had to save the baby from the king of Israel, the pharaoh, and Jesus was saved by going to Egypt.

The people of God had sunk so low, that when the God of the people came to them, he had to escape to Egypt.

### **One with his brothers**

So from the first days of his life, Jesus shared in the misery of Israel of old, but now, Israel itself was the cause of the misery. The nation had made a complete reversal - from being the persecuted people of God, trampled by pharaoh, they now persecuted the Son of God himself through their own pharaoh.

But still the grace of God was not exhausted. He had come to save the people that persecuted him. They had become 'Egypt' in the eyes of God, but He had come to make them the people of God again.

That small baby had been born from the virgin and the holy Spirit - fully man and full God - for taking the place of Israel. For representing the people before God.

This is the deep meaning of the words of Matthew when he quotes from the prophet Hosea, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Hosea spoke of the nation of Israel, and that nation is often portrayed in the Bible as the firstborn Son of God. Meaning, his unique child. But Matthew says: 'It is really Jesus of whom the prophet speaks.' Jesus himself is the true Son of God. Only He lived truly before God the Father to please the heart of God. What Israel could never accomplish, Jesus did. He pleased God his Father.

Finally God had found a perfect servant, a servant who put his arms around the sinful people of God and who said, Father, what they could not do, I did for you. Look at me when you think of them. See them in me. These are my brothers, my sisters.

So when Jesus left Egypt to go back to Israel, it was as if Israel made its exodus again. And when He came in the land, he lived the life that God desired.

Jesus now did what the people of Israel never could... He fulfilled all Gods dreams and plans with Israel. While Israel, hardly escaped through the Red Sea, made its first golden calf, and later, filled the land of Israel with idolatry, Jesus fully perfectly completely served God and worshipped God.

God could not find one perfect obedient servant in Israel - until Jesus came. And He came for the sake of the people, to represent them all before God.

Finally God received the honour due his name.

But in order to represent Israel before God, to be Israel, there was no way around it; the founder of their salvation, the Saviour of Israel, had to be made perfect through suffering. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews works this theme out in some detail.

### **3 To bring many sons to glory**

Jesus had to be made perfect through suffering. Now that sounds as if he was not perfect and only his suffering made him perfect. That is not what these words mean.

What it does signify is that the suffering that Jesus underwent, was the proper context to show his perfection. He lived for God each day, each moment, even in those moments when it would have been convenient to stop obeying and loving God.

Even when he was crucified by his own people, by those who behaved as if they were Egypt, as pharaohs, He loved God to the end. That moment of his death on the cross, is also called his Exodus in the gospel of Luke.

From the beginning of his life until his last breath on the cross was the Exodus of Jesus who included all those who believe in Him in his arms, when he safely entered into the promised land - that is, into the full restoration of the relationship between God and humankind.

The Letter to the Hebrews says, he became the perfect High Priest to mediate between God and us, to do away with our sins. It was this obedience even in the hardest moment, that made it possible for the slate of us sinners to be wiped clean; and his obedience made it possible for God to look at his true Son, and say: now my people - all those who believe in him - truly obey me.

And because God became one of us, and even felt the pain of temptation and suffering, he knows what we go through. He has the power to save, and he has the empathy - he wants to save. He knows us and he loves us.

The Letter to the Hebrews *also* uses language that reminds us of the exodus of Israel from Egypt; in Hebr 2:15 we read that Jesus came

to deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery; for surely it is not angels that he helps, he helps the offspring of Abraham.

Jesus came to set his people free. He came to bring peace on earth, as the angels sang. This is not a romantic feeling of christmas-peace, because that lasts very briefly, as we all know. But he did come to bring peace between us and God, and peace between us, between those who follow Him. And peace in our hearts - the assurance that God is with us, and that he is not against us.

He came down to us humans, in our Egypt, to take us out of Egypt into the promised land. The Son of God, the one eternally crowned with glory, came to us humans in our Egyptian life, our life of misery and sin and imperfection, and slavery, to lift us up and to crown us with eternal glory.

But for doing this, He had no other option but to go down to Egypt-land. And to be one with us.

### **Conclusion**

He came down to Egypt, for us and for our salvation. He did this for 'bringing many sons to glory', Hebrews says. This glory is, for us to be able to eat at the table with God, now and eternally. And for donating this joy to us, the Son of God left the table, to be with us for a while, to live our lives, to suffer our misery with us, and to even suffer the greatest misery inflicted to Him by us.

And in his love, when he returned to the table of God, after having fulfilled his exodus, He took all of us who believe in him, in his arms back to the promised land, back to God.

**Amen**