

**FIRST READING: Isaiah 63.7-9**

A reading from the book of Isaiah.

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,  
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,  
because of all that the LORD has done for us,  
and the great favour to the house of Israel  
that he has shown them according to his mercy,  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

For he said, 'Surely they are my people,  
children who will not deal falsely';  
and he became their saviour  
in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel  
but his presence that saved them;  
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;  
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.  
This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**SECOND READING: Hebrews 2.10-19**

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.'

And again,

'I will put my trust in him.'

And again,

'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.'

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**GOSPEL: Matthew 2.13-23**

**Alleluia**

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

**Alleluia**

After the wise men 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.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’ 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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

‘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.’

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘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.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 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. 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.’

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia.**

### **Sermon for Childermass, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2025**

This morning is the Feast of Childermass, perhaps somewhat less famous than the Christmas we have celebrated. There are two events in today’s reading which are recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel. They have become known in Christian tradition as The Massacre of the Innocents (hence Childermas) and the Flight Into Egypt. The fact that they are not included in the other Gospels have not prevented them from becoming a recurring image in art and literature down the centuries. Off the top of my head I can think of allusions or references to them in the legends of King Arthur, in the paintings of Caravaggio, in a piece of Staffordshire pottery owned by one of this church’s congregation, and in the novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*.

As so often when the details of the Gospels don’t quite tally, there is some doubt over the historical accuracy of these particular episodes. However, there seems to be very little doubt over the theological shape of them. Just as, for example, when the Gospel of John has Jesus die on the evening of the day before the other Gospels – it seems strongly likely that this seemed the right time to the writer of the John’s Gospel because this was the hour when the lambs were slaughtered in preparation for Passover. The identification of

Jesus with the sacrificial lambs, and the associated memory of those lambs protecting the Israelites from the angel of death, shines through the variation in detail.

For the Flight and the Massacre, the important point is the way they frame Jesus within the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. He is in danger from an intended massacre of children by a tyrannical king. He is cherished secretly in Egypt, before returning out of Egypt and bringing salvation to the people of Israel. In other words, he is the second Moses. There is an idea that the Messiah should be “a second Moses” in both Jewish and Christian thought in the ancient world. For example, the Church Father known as Eusebius of Caesarea listed sixteen separate connections between the two men in a treatise called *The Demonstration of the Agreement Between Jesus and Moses*, and in the Talmud Rabbi Isaac II is reported to have made a great point of it:

R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Isaac: As the first redeemer was, so shall latter redeemer be. What is stated of the former redeemer? And Moses took his wife and his sons and set them upon an ass (Ex.4,20). Similarly will it be with the latter redeemer, as it is stated, Lowly and riding upon an ass (Zech.9,9). The former redeemer caused manna to descend, as it is stated, Behold I will cause it to rain bread from heaven for you (Ex. 16,4), so will the latter redeemer cause manna to descend, as it is stated, May he be as a rich cornfield in the land (72,16). As the former redeemer made a well to rise, so will the latter redeemer bring up water, as it is stated, And a fountain shall come forth of the house the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim

A keen reader of the Gospels these days can see the kind of parallels Eusebius and Rabbi Isaac are making fulfilled in the details of Jesus’ life. He did provide manna in the wilderness at the feeding of the five thousand, he did make a well to rise when he offered living water to the woman at the well, he did appear in Jerusalem riding upon a donkey. He also gave moral teachings on a mountain, paralleling Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, and his face shone mysteriously during the transfiguration like Moses’ face on the mountain. Jesus walked on water; Moses parted the Red Sea. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tested; Moses led the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness.

Of course, we’re most likely to be reading the other way round to most of the early Christians. I’ve been pointing out bits of the story of Moses which echo Jesus’ life. For

them it would be the opposite: because they were devout Jews they would know the Hebrew Scriptures so well, especially the first five books, known as the Books of Moses. For them the life of Moses and his part in God's saving actions for the Israelites would be the familiar story, and the details of Jesus would be the one which seemed to echo the well-known texts.

Today the two parallels are equally strong between Moses and Jesus. In our Gospel reading we hear that

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

If we go back to the time of Moses, another tyrant gave an order to wipe out children. At the beginning of the book of Exodus it says:

Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. <sup>9</sup> And he said unto his people, Behold, the people of the children of Israel *are* more and mightier than we: <sup>10</sup> come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land. <sup>11</sup> ...And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive.

Two violent dictators, both worried that a leader would come out of the Israelites to dethrone them and end their reign of violence. Two attempts to pre-emptively wipe out the potential leader by a horrific act of mass murder. In both cases it failed, and in both cases a boy was saved who would lead his people.

The second parallel comes in the place where Joseph and his family fled, before returning:

After the wise men 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.'

...

'When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, '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.'

So the infant Jesus comes out of Egypt, as part of his destiny to restore the faith of Israel and bring salvation. The parallels, well, essentially the entirety of the book of Exodus. Moses led the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness and towards the Promised Land. Jesus traces the same journey as a child, though of course he reaches Israel himself.

So what do these intricate parallels tell us, on the first Sunday of Christmas, the feast known as Childermass? They might remind us of the deep roots of our faith in Jewish tradition and spirituality. The Hebrew Scriptures are a huge part of the Christian Bible, and to understand them better is to understand the New Testament better. They might also point us back to fascination and delight of Bible-reading itself. We may sometimes think, when it comes to the Bible, that we know the story, we know the point, so reading the Bible is just reminding ourselves of what we've already got sorted. But things like the symbols of Jesus as the new Moses draw us further into the layers and movements which are waiting just below the surface of the text. The more we explore the Bible, the more intriguing and absorbing it becomes. The details which don't seem to make sense, such as Matthew's Gospel having these unexplained events, can often turn out to be the most fascinating. And finally, this might underline that we have just had the Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, in which we worshipped Jesus as Christ, as Lord, as Light and as Messiah. Today's reading shows that we could spend the whole of this year delving deeper into who Jesus actually is, and what those names mean.

Amen.