Sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist First Sunday of Christmas 28 December 2025

Readings: Matthew 2:16-18

Just a few days ago, we gathered here to celebrate the birth of Christ. We sang carols about peace on earth and goodwill to all. We lit candles. We told the story of shepherds and angels, of Mary and Joseph, of a baby lying in a manger. The atmosphere was warm, joyful, and hopeful.

And now, today, we read this.

"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."

It feels almost cruel, doesn't it? To move so quickly from the joy of Christmas to the horror of Herod's massacre. But perhaps that jarring contrast is precisely the point.

The Shadow Side of Christmas

Matthew's Gospel doesn't let us linger in the stable. Almost immediately after the wise men depart, the holy family becomes a refugee family, fleeing in the night to escape Herod. And the children of Bethlehem—those who weren't warned—pay the price for Herod's paranoia.

This is what happens when the light enters the darkness. The darkness fights back! Herod saw the Magi's question—"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"—as a threat to his power. Like every tyrant throughout history, he responded with violence. Not strategic violence, but the indiscriminate violence of a man consumed by fear and rage.

The text tells us he "killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under." This wasn't precision. This was a massacre. Children whose only crime was being born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This isn't just ancient history. This is the pattern that repeats itself whenever power feels threatened, whenever tyrants choose violence over vulnerability, whenever the powerful oppress the innocent to maintain control.

Matthew tells us this "fulfilled" what was spoken through Jeremiah. That word is important. This isn't Matthew saying God wanted this to happen. Rather, he's saying that in the midst of horror, there's a pattern we've seen before: God's people crying out in suffering, inconsolable grief, the powerful crushing the vulnerable.

Rachel Weeping

The passage Matthew quotes comes from Jeremiah 31. Rachel-the beloved wife of Jacob-had died giving birth and was buried near Bethlehem. Centuries later, when the people of Judah were taken

into exile, Jeremiah imagines Rachel weeping from her grave as her children are marched past into captivity.

"She refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

That phrase haunts me. She refused to be consoled. There's something profoundly honest about that. No easy comfort. No spiritual platitudes. Just raw, inconsolable grief. We live in a culture deeply uncomfortable with that kind of grief. We want to fix things, to help people "move on." But Rachel refuses. And perhaps there's faithfulness in that refusal— a refusal to pretend everything is fine when it manifestly isn't.

This is why lament is an essential practice of survival in response to trauma.[1] Lament is how we survive when the world breaks us. It's how we stay human in the face of inhumanity.

Lament does something crucial: it names reality. It offers words to articulate the unspeakable. It legitimises pain and even our doubts about God's activity. But lament doesn't just name reality—it protests against it. It refuses to accept that things must always be this way. Rachel's weeping is an act of resistance. It says: this should not be. This is not how things are meant to be.

Biblical lament affirms simultaneously God's goodness and the horror of reality, without collapsing one into the other. It doesn't explain away suffering by saying it's part of God's plan. It doesn't deny God's goodness by saying suffering proves God is absent. It holds both truths in tension: God is good, and this is horrific.

When I think about Rachel's refusal to be consoled, I think about parents in our own time who have lost children to violence-families in Gaza and Israel, mothers in Ukraine, parents who have lost children to knife crime, to suicide. Rachel weeps. And sometimes, the most faithful thing we can do is to stand with her in that weeping and refuse cheap consolation.

Where is God in This?

Where is God in all of this? God sends his Son into the world to save it. An angel warns Joseph to flee. The holy family escapes. But what about the other families? Why didn't they get an angel?

Matthew doesn't answer that question.

But notice: Matthew doesn't try to explain this away or justify it. He quotes Jeremiah. He places this massacre within the long story of God's people suffering under empire, under power. And crucially, he shows us that the Messiah himself becomes a refugee, a displaced person, one who knows what it means to flee for his life.

The incarnation means that God enters the world not as a distant observer but as a participant in human suffering.

Jesus doesn't come to explain suffering. He comes to share it. From the very beginning, Jesus is identified with the vulnerable, the threatened, the displaced.

1 The next few comments about 'lament' are adapted, and quote, from a talk by the Revd Dr Isabelle Hamley at the 2022 Oxford Diocesan Conference.

Living Between Christmas and Easter

How do we hold together the joy of Christmas and the horror of Herod's massacre? We must resist the temptation to resolve the tension too quickly. We live in the time between Christmas and Easter. Between the announcement of God's kingdom and its full realisation. Between the promise of peace on earth and the reality of violence and suffering. The Church's wisdom in giving us this reading is that it refuses to let us sentimentalise the incarnation. It insists that from the very beginning, the story of Jesus unfolds in the real world-a world of tyrannical rulers and political violence, of refugees and massacres, of mothers who refuse to be consoled.

But-and this is crucial-it's also a story of hope. Not cheap hope. Not naive hope. But hope forged in the crucible of suffering.

If we continue reading in Jeremiah 31, beyond the verse Matthew quotes, we find this: "Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country."

Rachel weeps. But Rachel's weeping is not the end of the story. God promises restoration. God promises new life.

This is the pattern of Scripture: exile and return, death and resurrection, cross and empty tomb. The pattern is that God meets us in suffering and brings life out of death.

Our Response

How do we live in light of this text?

First, we must be honest about suffering. We mustn't rush to comfort or easy answers. Sometimes the most pastoral thing we can do is sit with people in their grief and let them refuse to be consoled. To make space for lament.

Second, we must stand in solidarity with those who suffer. The holy family were refugees. Jesus knew what it meant to flee violence, to be displaced. The Church must always stand with the refugee, the displaced, the vulnerable. We cannot worship a refugee Christ and then turn away from refugees at our borders.

Third, we must resist exploitative power. Herod's violence was the violence of a man desperate to cling to power. Every time we see power protecting itself at the expense of the vulnerable-whether in our own hearts, our institutions, or our nations-we must name it and resist it.

Fourth, we must hold on to hope. Not naive hope, but resurrection hope. The hope that believes God is at work even in the darkest places. The hope that believes death doesn't have the final word.

Conclusion

The baby in the manger grew up to be a man who would himself face violence. Who would himself be arrested, tortured, and executed. Who would die a violent death while others looked on. But the story doesn't end there. On the third day, he rose. And in that resurrection, God

declared that violence, death, and empire do not have the final word. Love does. Life does. God does.

We live in that in-between time. Between Christmas and Easter. Between the already and the not yet. Between Rachel's inconsolable weeping and the promise of restoration. In that in-between time, we are called to be people who name the darkness honestly, who stand with those who suffer, who work for justice, and who stubbornly, persistently, hold on to hope.

The child in the manger came to bring light to those who sit in darkness. That light has entered the world. The darkness has not overcome it. And it never will. Amen.

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