

# Stokesley Methodist Church



**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January, 2019**

## *Welcome to Worship – Epiphany*

10.30am Covenant Service led by Rev Andrew Robinson,  
including the Sacrament of Holy Communion

6.00pm Town Close with Rev Andrew Robinson (HC)

### **A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources**

We gather in the aftermath of our keeping of Christmas, when already the storm clouds of your presence are gathering. On this day we are reminded that your coming among us attracts sorrow and pain as well as joy and laughter. May we be strengthened by your love to follow you.

May our lives be held in loving arms,  
cradling us from every danger.

May we never know of any harms  
at the hands of friends or stranger.

Lord, our fears are manifold,  
of the dark and the unknown.

Be our guide and make us bold,  
because with you we're not alone.

**Amen.**

### **Lectionary Readings:**

**1 Samuel 1 v20-28** Hannah Dedicates Samuel

*'I prayed for this child, and the Lord granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord.'*

**Psalm 135 v1-14** *'Your name, O Lord, endures for ever'*

**1 John 4 v7-16** God's Love and Ours

*'And we have seen and testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.'*

**Matthew 2 v13-23** The Escape to Egypt/The Return to Nazareth

*'And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the Prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'"*

## **Fight or Flight?**

The passage from Matthew's Gospel tells how Mary and Joseph had to wake baby Jesus in the night and escape with him to safety. Jesus' early years were very disrupted. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream yet again, and this time the news is bad. The angel warns Joseph of the danger he, Mary and their baby are in from King Herod.

It is in keeping with Herod's character that he fell into a great rage when he heard the news of this 'new born king', and so gave orders for the massacre. The Herodian dynasty was constantly occupied with intrigue and bloody feuding. There was a saying at the time that it was 'safer to be Herod's pig than his son'! Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt. Matthew sees in these events a repetition of what happened before the Exodus. Once again a king wants to kill Jewish children, but just as Moses was saved from Pharaoh's orders by being hidden in the bulrushes, so now Jesus is to be saved by fleeing to Egypt. This all gives

Matthew the opportunity to explain the fulfilment of the prophecy from Hosea (11 v1) that God called the people out of Egypt. Jesus is shown to be God's son because he will live through a similar exile to his forebears.

There is an abrupt change of timescale in verse 19, when Joseph has more angelic visits, directing him to make his home in Nazareth. At that time Judea was ruled by one of Herod's sons and it would still have been very dangerous to settle in Bethlehem. Nazareth, however, was a rather isolated town in the hill country. One of Matthew's purposes in this passage is to show his readers that, even though Jesus was brought up in Nazareth, he was *born* in Bethlehem, as a descendant of David should be.

Discretion is the better part of valour. God's directive to Joseph is to flee to Egypt. If the holy family remains in King Herod's territory they risk extinction. To each there is a season and it is clearly not yet the time for Jesus to be martyred. He must be saved so that his earthly ministry may first be developed. In a similar way, we need to pick which battles we fight and when. Just bowing to what is inevitable is not the same as consciously choosing a path. Jesus said, 'No one takes it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.' (John 10 v18).

Who is the most threatened? Whether the ruler is King Herod or Saddam Hussein, we see a little child who never really made it into full humanity. Such rulers stamp their feet (all over other people) as a means of getting their way.

Yet the truly human being is the one who lies in a manger. Much of our so-called power doesn't make us human — it breeds in us the opposite. We get delusions of grandeur. We abuse God-given powers, our own and those of others. 'Empty vessels make most sound.' Herod, despite so much power at his disposal, feels under

attack the moment he hears of Jesus. If the holy family go into flight, then Herod opts for fight. He is badly threatened.

The whole of this passage from St. Matthew's Gospel can be read as a parallel to the time of Moses and the Exodus. The threatened ruler on that occasion was Pharaoh. Jesus is a very different kind of king. Pharaoh orders the murder of the Hebrew first-born but Moses is saved by a loving family. Jesus is also protected by his. In attempting to demonstrate God's power, the Egyptian households are slaughtered. This time the innocent, signalling a new pattern of behaviour, bear the brunt. Moses led his people *out* of Egypt. Jesus escapes *into* Egypt. Two stories but different outcomes.

Time and again we hear of whole communities (whether it be refugee camps or whole cities) being attacked to justify destroying a few.

Are we inappropriately using such power as we have, either as individuals or as a community or nation?

What can we, as relatively powerless individuals, do to change this?

Can you identify a time in your lives when you tried fighting something which you now realise you should have taken flight from. Alternatively, can you recall a situation from which you fled, which, with hindsight, you wished you had stayed and fought.

Can you look at your circumstances, which up to now, you have seen as belonging to one of these two categories and which could be converted into the other?

Can you look at one of these situations and find the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats? Why not offer this situation to God, for his guidance to turn weaknesses into strengths and to turn threats into opportunities.