

Sermon 29<sup>th</sup> December 2013  
Psalm 148 Mt 2:13-23 'Re-Orientation Opportunities'

*Prayer: God of old ways, new starts and reorientation offerings, give us the courage and wisdom to honour all. May our ears hear and eyes see the ways that every part of your created world shouts, "Hallelujah." Help us know, love, and live the Christmas born in each of us today! Hallelujah, Amen.*

I know that by now most, if not all of us gathered here this morning will have seen this video. But I decided it still has words for us this morning. It begins in the same 'place' as the psalm, with the creation, the totality of the 'Universe and the creator – and then bring us back to the tiny, 'puny-in-comparison' human.

## Show Video

The psalm and video start pretty much in the same 'space', and I believe end only slightly apart from each other. The video brings the focus to the meeting of YHWH-God and each individual in this room. The psalm arrives at humanity without drilling down to each individual's response to YHWH-God. The psalm has a focus on a responsive action of giving praise to God, from everything the psalmist could think of. The video has a focus on the responsive action of knowing and loving God.

What both offer us is the beginning point for living. And that beginning is not accidental, 'chance', good luck – but a deliberate action from the creator who wants us. Who wants to be in relationship with us, and that us in the psalmist's eyes is far more than humanity. The Psalmist sees the whole of creation – stars, storm winds, sea monsters, fertile plains, humanity as responding to being wanted and made to order – by offering praise.

We start living in relationship with God-Creator, our initial formatting / orientation in life is from this beginning place. And the only thing we can do in reply is offer our complete praise says the psalmist. The video creator says the only thing we can offer in reply is ourselves and that's one of the mysteries of Christmas.

One of the challenges this morning presents to us is that we have a tendency to limit praise to something we do on Sunday mornings in church! But the psalmist says the storm, when fulfilling its creation – **is in that moment** praising the creator; whenever a created thing fulfils its origins – it is praising the creator. H Wallace says:

*'All creatures praise the Lord by being the creatures the Lord made them. This is true also of the Lord's people, {of us} but ~~they~~ we also have a special task. It is ~~they~~ (v. 14) us who have been given the task of voicing this praise. One writer remarks: 'In the praise of the people of the Lord, the name that is the truth about the entire universe is spoken on behalf of the rest of creation.' (J.L. Mays) It is the name of Jesus, celebrated at Christmas.'*

Our task is to live – in response to all that the Lord has done, celebrating Jesus, who was born of God, at Christmas in our daily lives – not just singing hymns and carols on a Sunday. This is why God gave Him, not for us to keep him locked away and dusted off each Sunday for a few hours! But to live in the mess and hurts and laughter and fun of our daily lives; **and have us** respond in praise – despite our ordinary, messy – mixed up lives. A complete mystery why God wants us – but he said it was his plan, Jesus agreed completely and the Holy Spirit made it work! cV

It is always easy to stay with the nice, heart throbbing stories of our Christmas – with angels and shepherds getting terribly excited, wise-men / kings arriving and giving expensive if mysterious gifts... But our Matthew reading this morning warns that life rarely stays there. Yes God's plan was to

send his son to 'fit humanity' exactly beginning as a baby and grow and fulfil his given task – but even in that beginning the realities of human 'mess' threatened to dis-orientate God's plan.

Today we were given a glimpse of the power of Herod – another 'king' who sought the baby to pay homage' – so he said! Matthew records that in Herod's anger at being thwarted he sent his soldiers into the town of Bethlehem, to kill every baby boy, 2 years old and younger.

W Barclay says Bethlehem's size meant it would have had about 20-30 babies of the right age to be killed – not exactly tribal genocide, but is not one baby *too many*? *Simply* because of a king's insecurity, coupled with an insane rage was fully exposed and because he had that amount of power. He could so he did? The claim of Christmas is "Jesus is King and Lord" meaning Herod wasn't! Is not this battle still being fought? And fought, not only in the hearts and minds of those not of the faith, but also of those of us within it? CV

I would like to make a couple of points here – I have been asked to 'defend' this 'action of God's – in the killing of the babies in the past. Matthew does not write that it is God's plan for them to be killed. Questions like: *"Why did God have to kill these babies just to make the Scriptures come true?"* ~~This would be~~ Are a mis-reading, or mis-hearing, of the text. Matthew is careful in his wording, saying not that *"All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,"* but *"Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet...."*

*According to Thomas Long, this matters, because Matthew "stops firmly short of claiming that the murder of the children was God's will. The message is not that God summons evil to accomplish divine purposes, but that the scripture knows the tragic human destruction woven into the fabric of history and that not even evil in its most catastrophic form, evil as cold and merciless as the murder of innocent children, can destroy God's ability to save"* (Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion). Kate Huey-Matthews

In the middle of telling us about this evil action because of God's plan to save us, Matthew reminds us of one of the mothers of Israel, Rachel who cried for her children, mourning the loss of these latest little ones. The voice of the presence of God is not with powerful abusers but with the powerless, with those in mourning, who suffer from injustice and are without voice. Even with those who have to live by hiding in order to do what they have been called to do! – In order to fulfil their created task – in order to live out their praise. Jeremiah 31:15

What an upside down, mysterious faith we have, to live full into the life of faith and offer ourselves in daily praise we will find ourselves doing incredible things. It might be like Joseph – running and hiding in order to protect life, it might be like the wise-men, listening to council and changing what we were going to do; it might be like Rachel and to be known for sharing intimately in the grief and despair of God's people – where ever and whenever they hurt. It might be to find a 'right-kind' of anger because innocent children are still being murdered by rulers and would be rulers insecurities and insane rages are all powerful, and there are still soldiers who 'were just following orders'..... It will be as ordinary believers, people who chose to orientate their lives on YHWH-God, his Son and Spirit.

When you orientate your life so that your goal is to know God and to love him, we find the truth of the only response to all God has done – is to give ourselves and offer praise. When we start practicing this we find we can it in the most amazingly hurting, joyous, hilarious and despairing places on earth.

The angel said the good news of Jesus birth was for all people, 'A Saviour was born – Christ the Lord'. God's plan continues to be fulfilled as God's people through Jesus grasp the reality of a life orientated in faith. May you take time this week as we move into a new year to offer yourself anew to the Lord in praise. Amen.