

Family Protection
Feast of the Holy Family, Year A
Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23
26 December 2010

With Sunday falling so close to Christmas this year I will be briefer than usual in what I have to say.

The gospel passage we have just listened to has a middle section missed out that describes a traumatic event – King Herod’s massacre of the innocents. In the New Testament, and in the salvation history of the past 2,000 years, there is an invariable rule of thumb about outbreaks of radical evil. The more Divine goodness appears in the world, the more God raises the stakes with new initiatives for our salvation, the more human malice kicks back against it. In fact at times it appears that the resistance factor is of more than human origin – it can appear positively demonic. This is what Hans Urs Von Balthasar calls the law of progressive polarization. Evil acts and deliberately inflicted suffering occur in direct proportion to the degree of Divine activity in the world.

Herod’s decision to cull out all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under is the first of these spiteful, malicious God resisting acts in the gospel. But the reason this distressing incident is omitted by those who chose the readings is that they want to put the emphasis on what God does to protect the holy family. The Divine guidance with very clear travel instructions supplied to Joseph by angels in a dream on two occasions is making it very clear that no matter what bad people get up to around this vulnerable three some they will be ok. The holy family is under Divine protection, the hand of God is

on them, and his purposes will prevail despite all the machinations of the powerful.

Indeed, the way the story is told makes it appear that the people who think they are in charge, who believe that they control the flow of events in the world, aren't in fact. The centre of history and of significant events has moved quite elsewhere to this obscure and humble family, who despite all the attempts to track them down, remain obstinately off the radar of the security forces. These three figures are the moral centre of gravity in the narrative. And since all time is in God's hands we might notice that the powerless Herod is in fact dead by the time this little gospel vignette comes to an end. God rules ok in the incarnation is the message we are supposed to absorb today.

The Church focuses on the holy family so close to Christmas at the very time that families are spending time together more than at any other time in the year. These times of family togetherness can be the best of times and the worst of times. In a way they are a stock take on the state of family relationships, and the way family members really feel about each other. It would be good if we could all spare a prayer or two for the families who are struggling at this time. Let us ask God that just as he protected the holy family he will also defend the vulnerable families of New Zealand from their own unmaking. We can be sure that God has a particular concern and care for children who are at the mercy of adults who are neither kind nor responsible. And since prayer for others is often an invitation to action on behalf of others, in which we become a part of God's answering of a prayer, we might also be alert and aware of any helpful, supportive actions we might take in this regard.