**Home Service Sheet for Sunday 1st January 2023**

**Call To Worship:                Psalm 148:1-4**

Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
    praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
    praise him, all his hosts!

Praise him, sun and moon,
    praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
    and you waters above the heavens!

**Opening Prayer**

Gracious God, we come to You at the beginning of a new year with many different thoughts in our minds. In our worship today help us to remember that Your love for Your people and for Your Church knows no limits. The Psalmist writes of Your love reaching up to the heavens and Your justice reaching to the depth of the ocean, and yet You bless us as individuals with so many good gifts and the indwelling of Your Holy Spirit. May we truly be a light that shines Your Gospel light into the places we live and visit, and may this be to Your glory.
In Jesus’ Name we ask this, amen.

**Hymn                                     As with gladness, men of old**by ***William Chatterton Dix***

<https://youtu.be/6UzYlhF4ffw>

As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold,

As with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright:

So, most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to Thee.

As with joyful steps they sped, Saviour, to Thy lowly bed,

There to bend the knee before Thee Whom Heaven and earth adore:

So may we with willing feet ever seek Thy mercy-seat.

Saviour Jesus, every day keep us on the heavenly way;

And, when earthly things are past, bring our ransomed souls at last

Where they need no star to guide, where no clouds Thy glory hide.

In the heavenly country bright need they no created light;

Thou its light, its joy, its crown, Thou its sun, which goes not down;

There for ever may we sing hallelujahs to our King.

**The Lord’s Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Bible Reading:                    Matthew 2:13-23**

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, 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.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egyptand remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
    weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
    she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.”And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

**Reflection**

Officially we are still in the season of Christmas, although there seems to be little of cheer in our Bible reading today. Following the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the visit of the shepherds we don’t know how long it was before the Magi, or wise men, came to see Jesus. Traditionally we tend to assume it was very shortly afterwards, but honestly we just don’t know. They would have had a very long journey from their home land, and spent time in Jerusalem too. We even have a clue in our reading that Herod ordered the slaughter of baby boys, two years old and under. This points to a gap of up to two years and a bit before the visit of the Magi.

As interesting as this point is, it’s hardly something from which we can gain understanding about who God is, or direction for how we are to live. We would do better to focus on what our reading actually does teach us instead. Matthew begins by telling us that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, as had happened before when he was told that Mary’s child was God’s Son. This time the message is a warning, telling him what to do to protect the Son of God and his earthly family. “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you”, the angel said (v.13). Isn’t it interesting how God sends His future deliverer to Egypt, as He had done with Jacob’s son, Joseph, over a thousand years before.

In due time a deliverer would arrive from Egypt to save God’s people. However, this time it would not be from literal slavery and oppression under the cruel Egyptian taskmasters. Rather, Jesus came to free us from the much more cruel and dangerous taskmaster that is sin. Yet again the Old Testament foreshadows what God would do in and through His promised Messiah and Deliverer. The angel also revealed to Joseph why he needed to flee to Egypt with his family – “Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” As before, Joseph acted quickly and decisively. In the very next verse we read, “he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egyptand remained there until the death of Herod.” (vv.14 & 15)

When God gives us clear direction in His Word about how we should live, and about the kind of decisions we are to make, we should act quickly and decisively. Joseph is a very good example for us to follow. Matthew also makes it clear that everything that happened was orchestrated by God to fulfil His Word that He had spoken through the prophets long ago. We see this not only in the journey of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt, but also in the slaughter of the young male children later in our passage. This may well raise an awkward question for us – how could God not only allow for this to happen, but actually prophesy that it would in advance?

This is the old problem of evil, but turned up to 11, as the rock group Spinal Tap might have sung! How could a good God allow bad things to happen to seemingly good, or innocent, people? First of all there is a false assumption here. No-one is good, or innocent, except God. The reality is that we all deserve to die as the just punishment for our sin and disobedience, even young children. It may not sit well with us, but this is the reality, and it is precisely for this reason that God sent His Son into this world to die for us. It is only because of God’s great grace, mercy and love that we do not all face such punishment in the final judgment. In the here and now bad things happen to people, not because they are any worse than other folk around them, but simply because they do. See Luke 13:1-5 for Jesus’ teaching about this.

This was all part of God’s plan of salvation that would benefit all who call upon the Name of the Lord. Herod intended to get rid of any potential rival to his throne, but God cannot be thwarted from His purposes and plans. Once Herod had died it was safe for Jesus to return to the land of Israel. Even then, though, there was still a potential threat from Herod’s son, Archelaus. Again an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream (for the third time that Matthew records for us) and warned him to settle in Galilee, and specifically the city of Nazareth. Again this would be the fulfilment of prophecy. Throughout the Advent and Christmas stories we see ancient prophecy after ancient prophecy coming to pass in the life of Jesus, the Son of God and promised Messiah.

Perhaps above all else this should confirm to us that God’s plans always come to pass, even if they don’t happen in the timescale we might like them to. Jesus will return one day to usher in the Kingdom of God in all its fullness. We can trust in the One who knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). We can believe in the One who loves us and cares for us so much that He sent His only Son into this world to save us from our sins. He deserves our obedience and loyalty in return for all that He has done for us and all that He has promised He will do in the future! Amen!

**Prayer**

Gracious God, we live in a world of violence, oppression and despair. Yet it is also a world to which You have revealed the hope that is to be found in the Gospel of Your Son, Jesus. May You help us to be good witnesses to the hope that is found in You, and through us may You build Your Church here on earth. We pray for those who face terrible hardships in this life, the young, the elderly and all those in between. We ask that they would come to know Your mercy and love towards them in Jesus. Grant them relief from pain, poverty and worry we pray. We pray too, O Lord, for those who protect the weak and vulnerable and ask Your blessing upon them in the work that they do. This we ask for Jesus’ sake, amen.

**Benediction**

Heavenly Father, at the start of this new year help us to remember Your promises and trust You because of who You are. We know that You are a faithful God, and it is because of You that we can have hope for the future. May Your faithfulness be the one thing we always remember and rely on, and may You always be the source of our hope and joy. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.