



Rachel's Tears Matthew 2 :13-23

Often open my sermons with something funny; something to light to introduce subjects which are serious. Today I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to draw your attention to some things that we find deeply distressing:

TRAGEDY

We are all familiar with the consequences of natural disaster on our planet. Even the floods and storm damage over Christmas has brought that home to us. In other parts of the world where nations are poorer, less well-prepared, where houses and infrastructure are poor, weather conditions like we have experienced are a massive killer.

NEEDLESS DEATH

Each year, nearly 15 million children under the age of five die around the world. By that I mean die needlessly of preventable diseases or in WARS or civil strife.

STARVATION

Usually deaths are easily preventable – by administering vaccinations costing a couple of quid. Or providing clean water which may cost as little as £1000 for a village, or providing basic education on good sanitation and simple health precautions.

It's amazing that in a world where there's more than enough food to feed each person to a good standard that some 40% of children under the age of five in the developing world still suffer from malnutrition. The scandal is that too often food is too expensive for poor families to afford, for no other reason than to protect the economies of richer countries; like ours .

Over the last few years we have heard stories from around the world in this church from Russia, South Africa, Nigeria, Syria, the Philippines, China, India, Pakistan of tragedies in the lives of children whose only crime has been to have been born in a society where their needs are not met. Even in our own land we hear tragic stories of children being abused and even killed.

What sort of world do we live in that this can and should happen? The problem is we look down history and see the human race has been committing these atrocities on itself since the dawn of time.

WHY DOESN'T GOD DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT?

Why has He let this happen for so long? Let me start dealing with this by looking at the relationship God had with the human race at the start:

Genesis 1: 26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground." 27 So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." (NIV)

In other words, God created the human race to be rather like Himself. We were made to have

dominion over the planet, to fill it, to govern it, to control nature and the environment. And we've done just that as a species. Govern means just that. We're in charge of this planet and all on it as a race and species. I'd compare it to the tenancy on a property. Whilst you're in it, you're responsible for it. But when the landlord comes to inspect, you're in trouble. But he doesn't do that every day, or every week. Sometimes rarely. We are God's tenants, His occupants, and we have a responsibility for its right stewardship.

And He made sure people had an idea that was expected of them – creation, conscience, His written word. I don't have time to go into this in detail today – perhaps another time. We are made in the image of God, with all His creativity and with His sense of responsibility. We just don't have His knowledge, but we have been given the ingenuity to work things out.

1. **Humans are responsible for their actions** and all have sinned and come short of God's glory So why doesn't God jump in every time we screw up. Because He's replaced the responsibility for one another and for this earth into our hands. It's our responsibility and we have the power as a race and a species to change things and clear up our own messes.

What a great job we made of it! For all our advances, we haven't eradicated suffering through progress – we've inflicted more horrors in the civilised technological age of the 20th Century than almost all the other centuries put together. We're responsible as a race. Yet in each generation we produce a despot – Robert Mugabe, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Jozef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Bashar el Assad in living memory. Why didn't God do something about it? Let me answer that in two ways:

– what did we do to stop it?" QUOTE *All that is required for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing*" - attributed to Edmund Burke – Irish political philosopher 1727-1797. Whether it be on a national scale or whether it be in our private lives, it is easier not to notice and mind our own business than to do something about injustice. Yet God made us to be beings that are just and holy, loving and merciful like Himself – but all have sinned and come short of God's glory. No wonder the world falls short too. God gave this race the responsibility for this world. We still have it until such time God comes for a day of reckoning.

And that isn't quite yet – God **has done** something about it. At the very basic, He has left us creation as a model, our conscience and His written word. Humans have everything they need to do the right thing.

And there is His Church – His own people to be a model of good stewardship – an example to others – and to intercede on behalf of others. People who would call on God to intervene. And as a result He left a presence in the world that could and should make a difference on every scale of human existence. But how often we fall short of that as God's people don't we. History is also littered with a failure of church and Christians being a force for evil rather than a people that are able to invoke the power of God.

But this then begs the question:

2. **Why doesn't God intervene?**

He jolly well has! Somehow we like the Christmas story to be twee and pleasant. But here in the Christmas story is a very dark element that rarely gets read and could hardly be celebrated – genocide by King Herod.

HEROD

Herod was a pretty ghastly king. He was half-Jewish and kept the Jews sweet by modernising the temple and fortifying Jerusalem. But he knew that the Jews saw him as a foreigner in effect and stamped out opposition, not being afraid to kill anyone who crossed him or challenged his authority.

KIM

He even had some of his own family murdered. He reminds me of Kim Jong Un. Same scale of despot, same level of murder. Because he thought he had a rival, the Bible says he enquired diligently of the wise men when the star had appeared then worked out that if he killed all males in Bethlehem under two, he's probably get rid of this rival the wise men sought.

KILLING

We don't know how many boys were killed. Most scholars would take an educated guess at 20 or 30. But that's still a lot of children.

GOD SAVED JESUS

How comes God spared His Son and allowed Herod to have his evil way and kill these children? It doesn't seem just. But then our thoughts start to go towards the millions of children who have died as a result of genocide in our own generation, and the children dying of preventable causes in this world this very day. How many children have died in Syria today of war and its consequences – 20? 30? More?

Jesus was spared, the children were murdered. Why?

Jesus came into a world where the human race is responsible for itself. He came straight into the injustice that caused a child to be born into less than perfect conditions. His family experienced immediately what happens in every generation – an evil king and genocide of innocents. It wasn't just those 30 Herod had killed – he was responsible for thousands of deaths. But before we stand in judgement on Herod, let's remember that we can be as bad. It's our society that has contributed directly and is contributing still to major conflicts in the world, starvation in other parts of the world, greed that has collapsed the financial system and causes hardships to the poor. We are part of that society and we are responsible.

So why did God spare Jesus on this occasion? Matthew's quoting of Jeremiah 31 gives us the answer here. Here's it from an English translation of Matthew's Greek OT, called the Septuagint

VERSE

15 Thus did the Lord say: A voice of lamentation and weeping and mourning was heard in Rama; Rachel did not want to stop weeping for her sons, because they are not. NETS

He takes us back to a time some 580 years previous where the invading Babylonians invaded the Bethlehem area and took away the children and young men into Babylon – well, the ones they didn't kill! Near Bethlehem was Ramah where Rachel, the wife of Israel (Jacob) was buried. You can still visit her tomb near Bethlehem. Jeremiah uses poetic language to describe this loss of the young from Bethlehem (and elsewhere) by describing them as Rachel's children.

It seemed an awful fate for these young people who seemed to have had nothing to do with the sins of Judah that caused their nation to be destroyed by Babylon. But Matthew knew what came next. He understood the context of the passage. Here's what follows.

VERSE

16 Thus did the Lord say: Let your voice cease from weeping, and your eyes from tears, because there is a wage for your works, and they shall come back from a land of enemies; 17 there will be permanence for your children. NETS

Those young people taken away were to become the vanguard of the return. Out of the tragedy of human sinfulness and injustice God was going to do something amazing. 80 years after Jeremiah's prophecy, the people and their descendants that came back from Babylon laid the foundations of a strong faith in restored Judah.

Yes, the slaughter of the innocents was wicked act, but out of the sin of evil men, God was going to bring something good out of it.

JESUS: SPARED TO DIE

Jesus was spared – what for? To suffer and to die. His was a road of suffering that led to the cross. In the end, God didn't spare His own Son. He bore the most awful punishment for our sins.

It was a suffering that would make a difference to countless millions of men and women down the history of the last 2000 years. Out of the minuses, God was going to produce pluses. Jesus was spared on that occasion yes, but He's not escape death – that was His destiny. Here's a verse I gave you last Sunday: *Christ himself carried our sins in his body to the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. It is by his wounds that you have been healed. 1 Peter 2:24*

In order to destroy sin and all the pain and suffering and death, the consequences for God were awful. Let's also realise as His people that as we bring good news and as we realise that to address the issues of sin, injustice and selfishness in our own society, we are not going to be met with open arms, but with confrontation, persecution, ridicule, pain, death.

William Willimon:

If love, God's love, is to come down to us, not to angels, but to us, there is going to be some pain in it, yes, and blood too. Someone will get hurt, for we are very hurtful in our loves and hates.

If our allegiances are to be dethroned, it will not be pretty. We hold on tight to our gods, and will not let them go without their being pulled from us.

At Bethlehem we see a prelude to events later at a place called Calvary. The one called King of the Jews goes head-to-head with our kings and kingdoms, and there is pain, and violence, weeping.

And because of His death and resurrection, God has through His people and the Holy Spirit's power made a massive difference to the lives of countless millions of people and the history of the world. Because in standing as witness to Christ, we as God's people have been that channel God has used to bring His light and life into the world. You don't have to look back far into history to see that Christians were at the heart of major social reforms in this country. In many ways it's so sad that the church these days stands back rather than is at the cutting edge of our society.

And when we see injustice and suffering in our society and world today, what do we do? . When we see the rule of despots, so often we also see a church that's ineffective in its society – not lovers of mercy and justice. But our call is to bring Good News, whatever the cost.

God has done the same as at creation in Christ. He's acted in this world and made the responsibility of bringing His love and His kingdom into a lost world using human beings – us, His people. Injustice and evil men still have sway in this world and the question we must ask ourselves is – what in the power of God's Spirit are we doing? What could we do? Bring them salvation is the most obvious thing – but actually we live in one of the most powerful and

influential nations in the world. It's a democratic country. We have a voice and we can use it. For the sake of the innocents – who are still there and still being slaughtered by evil men, we need to meet felt needs and bring them Jesus.

I'm going to finish with a story that's been going around that I first heard it a few years ago. It's just a story but the point it makes goes to the heart of the issue here.

It's called The Atheist Barber:

A minister and an atheist barber were walking through the seedy part of their city. As they saw the suffering around them, the barber said "This is why I could never believe in a God of love. If he is as kind as they say, why doesn't he do something about all this crime, disease, poverty, drug-dealing and vandalism?"

HOB

The minister said nothing until they came across an unkempt and filthy man with hair down his back and far too much stubble on his face. The minister said to the atheist: "You can't be a very good barber, or you wouldn't let people live around here without a haircut and a shave."

More than a little offended, the barber answered: "Why blame me for that man's condition? I can't help it if he's like that! He's never given me a chance! If he'd only come to my shop, I could fix him up and make him look respectable."

The minister replied: "Then don't blame God for the condition of these people. They've never given God a chance. If they would only come to him, he would fix them up and turn their lives around."

At the moment it lies with people's choice as to whether they accept Christ – whether they follow Him and do something about a lost world. But a complete reckoning is going to come to the whole of our race one day. Until that time, evil and suffering may be there – but the way by which people can be rescued from it is there too.

QUOTE

How can I sum this up. I'll give you this quote I found somewhere: Even though God is completely powerful, he has not yet removed suffering and evil from the picture. He's waiting...Waiting for as long as possible, to give as many people as possible the opportunity to make their peace with him....Seize the day...

*Preached by Mark Reid
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Scripture Quotes as marked.*