

December 28, 2014 "Christmas: The Consequences" Matthew 2:13-18

There is a saying...."everything that is old, is new again." What it means is that history has a tendency to repeat itself. Or to put it in the words of Solomon the wise, believed to be the author of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." It is a commentary on the nature of the sinfulness of man. We repeat our mistakes. We call the strategies and the programmes we create by new names, but we repeat our mistakes, over and over again.

It should not have come as a surprise, but it did. The terrorist organization ISIS attacked a school. They killed approximately 135, mostly children. It was in retaliation for attacks made upon ISIS. They justified themselves by pointing out they had spared children too young to have entered puberty, as though that made them merciful humanitarians. The world community was shocked. That reaction is still to be heard on various newscasts and programmes of commentary. The shock at this terrible deed, the slaughter of children will probably rank high in the list of news stories coming out of 2014, as the networks look back over the former year, as 2015 begins.

But...There is nothing new under the sun.

It is simply the truth. Reality. Every decision we make, every action we take or decide not to take, every human choice....has consequences. The Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus chose to create a new tax system. He ordered the first census to be taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria. It was a decision that had consequences. Joseph decided God had led him to marry Mary, to love her and honour her, to cherish her in sickness and health. That decision had consequences. Matthew is specific as to the nature of the consequences, some foreseen, some unforeseen, some providing new challenges for the couple and their infant son, some creating the dreadful cries of mothers and fathers who lost their children...weeping in Ramah...Rachel weeping for her children....because they are no more.

Once again we have celebrated Christmas. A recognition of the historical fact that the census was proclaimed, that it became law, that Joseph and Mary made the journey to Bethlehem because they were law abiding citizens in a conquered province. They were both of them of the line and the house of David. In spite of the pregnancy well along, almost at the fullness of Mary's time. They went to Bethlehem to register as part of that historic census. And while they were there she gave birth to their first child, a son and named him Jesus, as the angel had instructed Joseph.

Consequences. There arrived from the East an impressive caravan. The Magi, we don't even really know how many of them there were. The legend says 3, but on the number the Gospel histories are silent. What is recorded is that there were consequences of their seeing a star, and following it and arriving in Jerusalem. The whole city was in an uproar. Think of the implications! A child born to be king. Herod was the puppet king of Judea. Needless to say it came to his attention, this uproar. And Herod made a decision. He would find out where the baby was in Bethlehem and he would do...it was typical of Herod and his kin, he would kill the child. He would keep his crown and his station.

He provided information to the Magi. He asked them politely to return or at least send a messenger so that he too might go and worship the child. God spoke to them in a dream. Run this through your mathematical formulae. Each of the Magi having the same dream. The probabilities? They did not return to Jerusalem. They did not send a messenger to Herod. They headed for home by another route. And when Herod figured out what was happening he went through the roof. His fury was unquenchable. He ordered the death of all male babies 2 years old and under. And the slaughter was carried out. It was one of the consequences of Christmas.

I saw them before I drove into the driveway of the house in which my daughter lives in Brampton. 2 signs. At first I thought they were election signs. Plasticized cardboard on a metal wire frame. Royal Purple. The historic manse in Brampton is a Victorian style brick house right beside the limestone church. The front steps are no more than 15 steps from the street. One sign either side of the sidewalk leading to the steps and the porch and the front door. What did they say? "Christmas is about Christ." I made a mental note to ask my daughter what the story was behind these signs.

Tuesday, the day before Christmas Eve. Barbara and I had been out buying groceries. An email warned us that we were going to have company on Christmas Eve. 3 worship services at the Church and suddenly we are entertaining 12 for dinner...between the 1st and the 2nd services. So Tuesday had a frantic air about it. If we don't get it now....we won't have it....12 for dinner Christmas Eve, ...at least 6 for dinner Christmas Day. I was unpacking the groceries and carrying them into the house. The refrigerator was full to capacity yesterday, so most of this stuff is being stored in the cold but not frozen attic. Two flights of stairs. And I didn't sleep well the night before. I admit it. I was grouchy, on the edge of a real pity party.

I almost didn't hear her first shout. "Hey You!" I did hear just enough to turn and bark, "What's that?" "Hey!" she shouted at the old guy behind the van. "The signs!" "What?" I replied. But I knew what she had said, I just didn't get her meaning. "The signs," she said, "Right On!!" That was just about the moment I saw the bags in her hands. Groceries. She had just come from the church. It was Food Bank Day. She had just been given her allocation of supplies, one of the 100 or so who use the St. Andrew's Food Bank and get a free hot meal to boot....ham and scalloped potatoes, bread and home made desert. Christmas is about Christ. She liked the signs. She knows the lady minister in that house works at the Food Bank. Consequences. Every decision. Every choice.

There is a relationship between every choice, every decision we are told about in the story of the birth of Jesus and the cruelty, the bloodmindedness of Herod. God chooses to save sinners. There are people who serve the one who would work for 33 years to prevent that divine plan of salvation from bearing fruit. The baby boys of Bethlehem were slaughtered! God proclaims that the power of sin like this one must be stopped. The serpent tries again and again to stop grace from bearing fruit. People suffer. People perish. Even children.

This is the dark side of the Christmas story. It is all about Christ and the cross. Darkness does everything it can to prevent the light from shining forth.

There is another consequence of Jesus birth. Joseph and Mary both have grown through the experience brought on by the 1st census. When Joseph has dreams about angels, that disturb his rest he doesn't reach for Tylenol or a sleep aid, he pays attention. And he acts. He decides. He chooses. He doesn't wait for morning. He decides and acts now. The message of the angel who appeared in a dream was, "Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." If you ever wondered about Joseph's commitment to his first son, to Mary his wife, forget it. He gets them up in the middle of the night packs no more than they can carry and runs for the border between Judea and Egypt. Practical. Smart. Get out of Dodge....more importantly, disappear....like the Magi.

But it does not end there. Years go by. The child is no longer a baby. He is no longer a toddler. He is growing. He is getting taller. He is a boy. Joseph goes to bed. Joseph sleeps. He gets that old, old feeling. An angel in a dream. This time the angel tells him it is time to go home. That Herod, responsible for the slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem is no longer alive. And another tumbler clicks into place...the prophecy of Hosea.... "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1). All the pieces fit. All the pieces. Remember that mathematician who said all the prophecies concerning the Messiah came true in the birth, the life and the death and resurrection of Jesus. The equation says the odds of that happening just once are to all intents and purposes impossible. But it happened!

The lady with her groceries from the church foodbank got it before I did. Christmas has consequences. Because Christmas is about Christ.

Let us Pray;

Our Father, God in Heaven, help us to be worthy of Jesus. Help us that we might be agents of light in a world of darkness even as Jesus was an agent of light. Grant that our thoughts and our choices, our decisions and our acts might result in people's lives being shaped by grace even when we are unaware that it is happening. Grant O God that evil might not triumph because we choose to do and say things, making decisions and choices that bear the sign that we walk with you, and you walk with us. Make us yours and therefore claim this little bit of the world where we live and work and have our being as your own. May your Kingdom have evidence of its existence because we are what we are. Amen.