

12/30/12 Sermon:

Matthew 2:1-25 “Joseph Arise!”

Time and again as we consider our salvation, of God becoming man – that is, the Incarnation of Christ, if we are to make sense of the narrative and profit from the lessons God has placed within the Gospel message, we must remember that salvation is not something that happens *to* us, but is *in* and *through* and *of* the uncreated light of God in Jesus Christ. And that our experience of that light is based on the condition and state of our souls.

And that the state and condition (or health) of our souls is based on what we **do**. And what we do is often preceded by what we **say**, and that what we say is based on what is **in our hearts** - as Christ tell us in Matt.12 : *from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks*. And what is in our heart is going to be determined by what we **think**, because the mind (as all the Fathers tell us) is the doorway to the heart. This is why everyone from the ancient desert Fathers down to our contemporary Father Thaddeus teach, as we see in the title of his book “*Our thoughts determine our lives.*”

This is all very nice, but what does it have to do with the Incarnation and the Gospel reading today? Because the Gospel reading today shows in the starkest way possible the reality that this understanding of salvation can only happen if God gives us the freedom to act and speak and think – and hold in our hearts – what we will. And that the only way to cleanse our hearts of the passions is to be given the opportunity to submit ourselves freely to God...If He forces us then there is no real opportunity, and if he protects us from all temptation and trials, there likewise is no real opportunity.

I’ve said it before, and I will be saying it again: the main attack the rising atheist movement in this country is going take in the months and years ahead as they continue to gain adherents, is the suffering in the world, particularly from evil. That a supreme Being such as the God of Christianity, if He were real, would never allow the horrible suffering in the world. It’s proof to them that He just doesn’t exist outside of our imaginations.

But what we see in this account of the murderous rage of Herod set not just against God in the flesh as a baby, but to the innocent babies and toddlers who will be murdered, is the reality that God will not interfere with evil more than He does, because to limit man’s freedom to do evil is to also limit his freedom to submit to God. If he is not free to submit to God he cannot heal his soul and cannot attain righteousness. ...and that is what is so strongly revealed in this account of the flight of Jesus’ parents into Egypt – and even with the slaughter of the innocents.

Notice God uses obedient people (the Magi and Joseph) to thwart the evil intentions of Herod. He could have struck Herod as he struck so many – from the Egyptians in the Red Sea to the evil Canaanites in the promised land he all but destroyed to make way for His chosen people. But He doesn’t. He allows Herod to pursue the child and again, protects His Son not through divine intervention, but through the obedience of His servants.

Why? St. John Chrysostom tells us that if God had saved His Son in the way he saved Israel and so many of His servants in the past, realizing His divinity, the people would have assumed he couldn’t be harmed and the reality of Jesus humanity would have

remained confused forever. As it was it took hundreds and hundreds of years and several of the great Ecumenical councils to finally overcome Satan's constant attacks against the true and real human nature of Christ.

But the other reason is that God only limits our freedom to do evil when to not do so would be a barrier to our salvation, that is, the healing purification and perfection of our souls. God did not stop Herod from trying to kill Christ nor from murdering the innocent children because to do so would have kept his servants from the opportunity to be obedient to Him in risking their lives to obey Him, and it would have kept the children from receiving eternal crowns of martyrdom.

If you think from the perspective of eternity and the lives we'll experience in eternity – which is man's ultimate reality – then it makes perfect sense. How many of those children that were slaughtered would have gone on to believe and sincerely follow Christ and healed their souls? As with most places the Church has come to, a third at best – but for argument sake let's say half of them. And of those half, how many would have attained the healing of their souls that we see only in saints and martyrs? Certainly not more than a few.

The truth of this event is that in experiencing momentary suffering from evil, 100% of those children, every single one, gained the greatest good to be found in life - and indeed the purpose and meaning of life: the perfection of their souls. In other words, complete healing. Eternal health that will never grow old or weaken or be subject to pain again. An eternal relationship and experience with God in all of their being that will never change or be challenged.

Suffering that is endured, either directly from evil or indirectly from this fallen world, even if it is for just a few moments as we saw earlier this month, purifies and perfects the soul in a way nothing else in this world can. This is why we say: in this fallen world the tree of life is the Cross.

Aside from suffering at the hands of those who chose to do evil and are allowed to do so, the only other way to purify and perfect our soul is through obedience. To consciously set aside our will and through repentance pick up our cross and heal our souls of the passions. In every moment in everything we do, say and think, to submit to God and do His will rather than our own.

In today's narrative, the Evangelist Matthew allows us to peer into Herod's darkened and diseased soul. And let us make no mistake about it my brothers and sisters, we are all to a greater or lesser extent infected with this same disease...with the same passions – the same sin, the same pride and self-love that causes us to protect the worlds we create and where we rule as kings and queens.

St. Matthew also allows us to peer into the enlightened soul of Joseph where from within his purified heart, his humble and obedient conscience is able to hear the voice of God. And like the Magi he is able to see God in the infant Jesus.

And just as Herod's disease is among us today in epidemic proportions through the freedom God has given man to pursue the evil of self love which seems to know no limit;

yet this healing is also among us if we choose to embrace it. And while it is still offered only through the therapy of the Cross, it is offered freely nonetheless to all who are willing to live this therapy.

To all who are willing to go into the strange land within themselves as they discover the kingdom of God in their hearts, and who are willing to go into the strange land of the Church as the new Israel as they discover this kingdom of God within this world. A place where people come to die to themselves that they might live for Christ. And to the extent they do, will, in the depth of their consciences, in their hearts in the kingdom of God, hear and see God ...both now and ever and unto the ages of ages...Amen