

3. A real Sufferer - Christ the real sufferer for his people

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[0 : 00] Wonders of God's love come through Jesus Christ. And yet, neither the birth of Jesus nor indeed the life of Jesus were greeted with universal joy.

Listen to what Matthew records in chapter 2 of his Gospel. Now when the wise men 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 Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, Out of Egypt I called my son.

Then Herod, when he saw that he'd 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.

And then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. Her voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation. Rachel, weeping for her children, she refused to be comforted because they are no more.

[1 : 28] Well, Christmas is a great time, isn't it, for collective make-believe. Everything oozes, jollity and niceness. All the decorations and the cards are full of idyllic winter scenes.

And we're surrounded, aren't we, by wistful longings and sentimental songs and general notions of peace and harmony among all. The mood's still just about here, isn't it, on Christmas Eve.

But come the end of Christmas Day, and certainly, I guess, by Boxing Day, it's pretty much all evaporated. Isn't that right? I guess that's why Buchanan Galleries will be absolutely chock-a-block on Boxing Day for the sales.

Everyone desperate to escape from that concerted goodwill of the family Christmas. There's only so much you can take, isn't there? And the world outside will be back to normal, won't it?

The bickering of the politicians and the economists, the headlines about the debt mountains, the crime figures, the energy crisis, all these things that bring us back with a bump to the real world.

[2 : 35] Because, of course, try as we might, we can't sustain a make-believe world for long. We can't sustain this make-believe fantasy of the perfect Christmas for very long.

Because it is just that. It's make-believe and it's fantasy. And I suppose many people do think that the Bible stories of Christmas are just like that. They're just fantasy. Just stories to give a mythical backdrop to this, well, seasonal charade about peace and goodwill.

Peace on earth and shepherds and wise men and a star. These things all belong to the world of myth and make-believe. Far, far removed from the real world.

It's nice to sing about for a few hours at a candlelit service. But really, it's all part of this make-believe world of unreality. But the thing is, when you actually read the Bible's accounts of the birth of Jesus, you find it really isn't like that at all.

Look at what we just read in Matthew's Gospel. What kind of peace was that? What kind of fairytale scene of peace and goodwill? It's all about the slaughter of babies.

[3 : 46] It's about crazy despotic rulers. It's about fleeing refugees and grief and wailing of bereaved mothers. When have you seen that on a Christmas card? When have you seen that sung about in the Christmas songs?

It just doesn't fit, does it, with the make-believe world of Christmas and peace. Perhaps you'll allow me a few words this Christmas Eve, just to try and be a little bit more realistic about what the Bible's true message of Christmas really is.

Yes, indeed, there are shepherds and wise men and a star and angels. But they're part of a story that is not at all a make-believe and fantasy.

They're part of a world of stark reality, a world that we know only too well. The wise men came looking for one who was born king. But we're asking the question together in our services this year, what kind of king are we talking about?

Well, Matthew's Gospel tells us the whole story from the beginning to the end. It tells us the story of a king who was a real sufferer. That's the reality of the story of Jesus Christ.

[4 : 57] He came into a world of suffering and death in order to bring real hope. And yet, he did so only through his own willing submission to suffering and death himself.

That's why from the very beginning, even from his cradle in Bethlehem, as we've sung, we see the shadows of the cross of Calvary over him.

Because he who was born king was born to suffer and born to die. And that's Matthew's message, even here in these early verses, these unsettling verses about Herod's massacre of babies in Bethlehem.

Let me try and summarize his message very briefly as we think of three things. Matthew is concerned with the real world and with the real problem and also with real hope.

First of all, Matthew is clear. Jesus Christ came into the real world, a world of suffering and of pain and of death. The Bible is a very honest book.

[6 : 05] It doesn't collude in this kind of make-believe that we like to collude in ourselves. It doesn't try to pretend into existence a world that we would much rather have and much rather think about.

No, it's plain about the reality of the world as it is, full of pain, full of suffering and full of death. And the Bible is also blunt about why it's like that.

It's because it is an evil world. And it's an evil world because of a problem in the hearts of human beings.

Now, we today tend to try and argue away the reality of evil. Richard Dawkins would tell you it's all about us dancing to the music of our DNA. It's all just natural.

Others will explain it away in terms of sociology. Well, it's all just the effect of the environment or of psychology. And so people aren't wicked or evil. They're just ill. They just need help.

[7 : 06] That's pretty scant comfort, isn't it? To the victim of the serial rapist or the child molester or the swindlers who we've been reading about preying on the elderly with dementia, the con men and people like that.

Now, when the judge sends such people down to prison, he proclaims those acts as acts of wickedness. And in doing so, he's expressing the only truth that takes such things seriously as the willing acts of responsible human beings.

And the Bible is just as realistic, too. The world we know it is full of suffering and of pain and of death because it is a world deeply infected with evil.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was born into no idyllic myth, but into a world of tyrants, of inhuman rulers, of men whose paranoia and power-hungry policies led to the wanton killing of innocent people, even of babies, all for their own political ends, for their own advancement.

He's just speaking about the world of Hitler and Stalin, the world of Pol Pot, the world of Saddam, the world of Gaddafi. He's just speaking about a world like Afghanistan today or Syria today, a world full of terror alerts and bombs, a world full of political intrigue and spin.

[8 : 27] He's just talking, in other words, about the real world. Herod the Great was as bad as any of these I've named. He had murdered most of his family in ruthless paranoia about seeking to hang on to power.

He was just like some of the fanatics today who kill hundreds, even thousands, and even children for their own cause, whether it's a dictator who's crushing all dissent in his country, or whether it's a terrorist blowing up an aeroplane or something else.

You see, the Bible does not airbrush out that kind of reality. Wouldn't you have left out this bit if you were wanting to write a nice story for the children at Christmas?

I would. But no, you see, the Bible faces reality honestly. Evil is real. Can't be denied. But the Bible also says things that we don't like to hear.

It tells us where that evil has its root. We like to say, you see, that people are as they are due to society. And if you throw enough money at society and enough improvements, and if you do this and that and the other, then people won't be evil at all.

[9 : 40] People will all be good. But no, the Bible says, it's the reverse that's true. Society and the world are as they are because of people.

Because of what's true in the heart of every single human being. We say things like today, don't we? Like, well, there can't be a God, can there?

Because if there was a God, how could there possibly be so much evil in the world? But the Bible says no. You've got to look a lot closer to home for the answer.

Look into your own heart because that's where the root of the problem lies. It's not out there somewhere in the ether. It's in the rebellion that's natural to every single human heart.

Rebellion against the rightful rule of God over our lives. God, our creator. That rebellion is what the Bible means by sin. Of course, we're not all genocidal tyrants like Herod or Hitler.

[10 : 44] But we do all share the same human nature. And if we're honest, we know, don't we, that that is the root of so much suffering and sorrow and fracture and breakdown in our human world.

It springs from the thoughts and the words and the deeds that arise in the human heart. And when the effect of that is multiplied throughout mankind, well, on so many levels, it's the anarchy of sin and selflessness that is so wrecking our world today.

It's not the Bible's view of the world that's make-believe. It's our view that so often make-believe. A century ago, there was great unbridled optimism, wasn't there, especially in the West, that human prowess and human progress would solve all the world's ills.

That sounds so, so hollow today, doesn't it? Because we still know it's a world of wars and tyrants and genocide and terrorism and exploitation and inequality.

And the Son of God was not exempt from the consequences of human sin and of man's disregard for God. He came into the real world.

[12 : 04] And indeed, he became a real sufferer with us right from the start. In fact, he suffered more than any human being had ever suffered before and has ever done since.

And that's because, secondly, Jesus came into the real world to deal with the world's real problem. He came to bring an answer to the pain and the suffering and the death by dealing with the root cause of it all, by dealing with the evil in the heart of man.

Let me ask this. Why should King Herod have been so full of rage against Jesus, even in his birth? Why such murderous hatred? Well, because human beings don't take kindly to the suggestion that we are the problem that needs to be dealt with if this world is to be a better place.

And so whenever God intervenes in human affairs to bring his perspective on things, to call people to change their ways and to return to living under his authority, well, people always react with bitter resentment.

You tell somebody today that in God's eyes their life is on the wrong track and that God tells them they must turn around and they must submit again to his rule.

[13 : 23] In other words, they must repent and bow the knee to Jesus Christ. Well, for the most part, you get a very hostile reaction when you say that to somebody. And that's the way it's always been.

No change there. That's Matthew's point. He quotes Jeremiah, the prophet. Jeremiah was a much maligned prophet of God. Why? Because he had a very unpopular message in 7th century BC in Israel.

God is angry with your sin, he had to tell the people. Repent, change, or God is going to punish your sins. Well, of course, the people laughed at him just as they laugh today.

God won't do that, they said. God is a God of love. God will never judge anyone. Instead, they listened to all manner of false prophets who gave them the message they wanted to hear. Peace, peace, yes, all will be well.

Of course we're not sinners. Of course you're not the problem. You don't need to repent. That's very, very contemporary, isn't it? You'll find in the Christian church today, many people saying just the same thing.

[14 : 23] Oh, God could never be angry. God could never judge. No, you can live the way you like. That's all right with God. He'll accept you as you are. But no, said God, through the prophet Jeremiah, I am a God of kindness and love and that's why I must punish sin.

Otherwise, I wouldn't be good, would I? What kind of justice is there in ignoring evil? We know that. People are outraged, aren't they? Outraged when evil is not punished properly.

When people get away scot-free with heinous crimes. And so Israel was at last punished with great calamity. She was carted off in captivity to Babylon with great weeping, with deep grief.

And that's what Matthew quotes. We heard it twice in our readings tonight in Jeremiah. And then again, Matthew quoting it in Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 15. He quotes, figuratively speaking, Rachel, Jacob's wife, the mother of Israel, weeping from her grave in Ramah near Bethlehem.

weeping as the convoy of Israelites were taken away in slavery and in chains. Lamenting that her children were no more as a bitter consequence for their sins.

[15 : 36] It is a terrible picture. But it's a picture of the utmost realism because the Bible will not sanitize away the harsh reality of sin and evil and its consequences.

And yet, even in the midst of that weeping and misery, this same God of just and righteous judgment gives a promise of real hope despite judgment.

Indeed, apart from this one verse that Matthew quotes, every other verse in that chapter of Jeremiah is full of hope. The very next verse that he quotes says this, keep your voice from weeping.

There is hope for your future, says the Lord. And not only for the future of Israel, but for the future of all people who are tarnished with the curse of sin. No, sin and its consequences cannot be airbrushed out.

There is no cheap and easy peace. God will be just. God must be just. Otherwise, what kind of a God would he be worth knowing? But alongside the promise of his justice and punishment of evil is a marvelous message of grace and mercy.

[16 : 53] God's mercy and God's judgments are strangely mingled together. They're inseparable from each other. And all through the prophets they proclaimed a day when at last God would send a sword of judgment upon the whole earth when he would remember iniquity, when he would punish sin in a great day of judgment.

judgment. And yet those same days would be days when he will forgive iniquity. When he will remember sin no more.

So that there will be an end to all evil and there will be real peace. Real peace with God and therefore real peace among human beings once again.

Not a pretend peace but a real one. Because the world's real problem has at last been dealt with. The problem of sin and rebellion against God in the hearts of human beings.

But how can that be? Well the answer is explained in the whole of the story of Matthew's gospel. If you've never read Matthew's gospel we'd love you to take a copy away at the end.

[18 : 03] We have them at the doors. You can read it over Christmas. It'll only take you an hour or two. But this verse that Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31 it invites us to grasp the whole of the message of that great chapter of hope and to understand that in Jesus coming into the world that hope is now being fulfilled.

The day of forgiveness of our sins. The day of restoration of true peace with God. Even surrounded by the tragedy of death right from the very start.

This is God's great day of hope. you will call his name Jesus said the angel because he at last will save his people from their sins.

You might think there wasn't much sign of that was there for the weeping mothers in Bethlehem. No. And indeed it appears like that all the way through the story of Matthew's gospel especially as it comes to its climax which seems to be utter tragedy Jesus Christ put to death nailed to the cross.

But that is Matthew's clear message. Even in quoting these harrowing words about pain and weeping now at last he says there is hope there is hope.

[19 : 28] That's the final thing I want us to go away tonight remembering Jesus came into the world to bring real hope for the world. He came into the real world to deal with the world's real problem to bring real hope.

And he came to deal with the problem of suffering and death by dealing with the root of it all. With the root of sin and evil in our hearts. He came to save us from the curse of suffering and death through his own suffering and death.

That's the message of the gospel. Yes, Jesus was spared the massacre in Bethlehem. God's providential care took the whole family to Egypt for safety.

But only until his time was fully come. And he did drink the cup of terrible judgment and death. He drank it for all men and for our salvation.

At the end of his gospel, Matthew portrays that so graphically in telling us what Jesus' death was all about. It's a death in the place of sinners, he says.

[20 : 41] It's a great exchange of two cups. Do you remember? In the upper room to his followers, he offered the cup to them and said, you drink of this cup. It's the new covenant in my blood.

It's the cup of salvation. But in the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed to his father, let this cup, the cup of judgment, but not my will, but thine.

And he did drink the cup of bitter judgment and death for sins, so that those who are his might never need to drink that and might know instead the blessing of eternal life.

So yes, there is hope, real hope fulfilled in Jesus, because in the real world he came to deal with the world's real problem. Which, friends, is my real problem and your real problem, however much we want to hide from it and resist those who would tell us the truth about it, the problem of the evil in my heart and in your heart and the rebellion in my heart and in your heart against God's rule over us.

He dealt with it through his suffering and death, not for any sin of his own, but for our sins, for our rebellion, for our evil.

[22 : 10] Evil cannot be ignored, it can't just be airbrushed out, it's real and God just because he is a loving and a good God, he must punish evil.

But in Jesus, he has borne it all away for those who are his, so that we might hear God's words of infinite comfort and hope, so that God might say to us, keep your voice from weeping, keep your eyes from tears, there is hope for your future.

And that's the joyous message of Christmas, that's the message of Jesus' birth, then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophets. I'm sure it didn't seem so to the weeping mothers of Bethlehem.

It might not even seem so often to us today, still in a world of suffering and pain and death. Maybe it just doesn't seem so for you this Christmas. And yes, that's right, we can't pretend, can we?

But the Bible doesn't pretend and nor does Jesus. He's very plain about present realities. Just read in Matthew chapter 13 the parables when he tells us that my kingdom, doesn't look like much now, I'll admit it, he says.

[23 : 30] It just looks like a tiny seed of mustard. But the day is coming, I promise, when all will be revealed in power and in glory.

It's not yet complete. Jesus was clear, there's a time of waiting. Waiting for the bridegroom's return, waiting for the great joy when he comes again to gather all his own and to wipe every tear from their eyes and to bring them to the place of gladness and joy forever where no longer will there be any pain or suffering or death, when there will be the oil of joy instead of mourning, when there will be the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.

We are saved in hope, said St. Paul, hope. But there is hope. There is real hope. There is certain hope because Jesus came.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet. That day is not fully here yet, but in Jesus' coming it has begun.

As the dwarf proclaimed to the white witch in C.S. Lewis' marvelous story, the lion, the witch and the wardrobe, when the snows of the permanent curse of winter were seen to beginning to melt.

[24 : 54] This is no ordinary thaw, he said. This is spring. Your winter has been destroyed, I tell you. This is Aslan's doing.

Friends, that is the message of Christmas. To a world gripped in the cursed winter of pain and suffering and death because of sin. The curse has been destroyed.

Winter will come to an end. Its grip is broken forever. Spring has begun in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the summer of his wonderful kingdom will come because our Lord Jesus came as a king who knew real suffering, suffering and death for our real sins.

To bring real hope, eternal hope for all who are his. So may all of us know the joy of this real hope, the joyous hope of God's people this Christmas.

Amen. Let's pray. O God, our Father, how firm and sure your promise stands. Your word has proved the past in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 22] Your word will secure our future. So grant us the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ and the peace that comes from him alone, both this night and forever, we pray, for the glory of your name's sake.

Amen.