

## Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Week 3 - The Flight into Egypt

*'Warned by angels, moved to save him who was born our kind to save,  
Joseph leads his holy family far from Herod and harm's way.  
Mary shielding and consoling Jesus Christ the Son of God.'*<sup>1</sup>



### **Reading:**

*Matthew 2:13-15*

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

The days of simple joy that accompanied the birth of the infant Jesus did not last long. The angels and the heavenly host, whom the shepherds had witnessed glorifying God with triumphant praise, were once again silent and Simeon's words must surely have unsettled Mary and Joseph. In the silence of the night, *'the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph,'*<sup>2</sup> and revealed to him the squalid design of Herod who desired the death of Mary's son, Jesus. With no time to waste, Joseph was urged to *'Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt.'*<sup>3</sup> One can only imagine the chaos and consternation that followed, as Joseph and Mary got up, tended to the baby, gathered what they could and *'that night'*<sup>4</sup> began their journey to the south and to the west; fleeing their homeland.

Egypt was so important to the feeding of the city of Rome that it was not part of the ordinary administration of the Roman *imperium*; rather it remained under the personal control of the Emperor. Beyond the reach of Herod and a traditional place of refuge for Jews, even though it had once been the site of their former slavery, Egypt was also the land that had witnessed the infant Moses being protected from a death decree issued by the Pharaoh. By the mighty works of God the adult Moses would eventually lead the people of Israel out of captivity to the brink of the Promised Land. So too would Jesus come forth from Egypt,<sup>5</sup> to deliver not just Israel but the whole of humanity from the slavery of sin and death and take us to the Kingdom of the Father.

History has witnessed many waves of human migration, particularly at times when it is driven by significant climatic or socio-economic pressure or politico-cultural force, and we are experiencing such a time at present. Whether it be due to real want and real need, which can destabilise any society or community, or because governance is carried out by fear or oppression, people will inevitably move where possible to places that can offer them greater choice and chance of life. However, when considering the Holy Family's plight we would do well to remind ourselves that they were not migrants pursuing a better life but refugees who were fleeing persecution and death.

Any telling of human history must record the waves of persecution that peoples and societies, cultures and communities have endured through the ages. We see in the Holy Family the fledgling Church persecuted; hurried and harried from their homeland. Setting out for Egypt, in fear and uncertainty, they would likely have faced the lot of many refugees and been compelled to live in obscurity and poverty. They would simply have had to make do and been satisfied with whatever shelter they could find until it was safe one day to return to Nazareth. Sadly, persecution and even martyrdom are not things of the past - the Twentieth Century saw more martyrdoms than any other - and many Christians still have to draw strength and courage from the example of the Holy Family and somehow find the will to persevere in their faith.

Published in January of this year the World Watch List named the fifty countries where Christians are the most persecuted for their faith and in 2019 they recorded that every day, somewhere in the world, 8 Christians were killed because of their faith; 182 churches or Christian buildings were attacked every week and 309 Christians were unjustly imprisoned every month. *Agenzia Fides*, the information service of the Pontifical Mission Societies noted in December last year that, 'It is

*almost impossible to compile a complete list of the bishops, priests, nuns, pastoral workers, simple Catholics, humanitarian workers, or members of international organisations, who are attacked, beaten, robbed, and threatened. Just as it is impossible to make a census of the Catholic organisations at the service of the entire population, without distinction of faith or ethnicity, like schools, hospitals, hospitality centres, which have been attacked, vandalised, or sacked. Then, the churches profaned or burnt down, the sacred statues or images destroyed, the faithful attacked while gathered in prayer, provoke pain.'*<sup>6</sup>

In St Matthew's gospel we are presented with St Joseph as the principal actor, *'taking the child and his mother with him,'*<sup>6</sup> and Mary therefore as the more silent contributor. It is true that Mary is compliant, but her willingness to heed Joseph and go with him into Egypt is not just about the safeguarding of her infant son. It is also about doing God's will. Mary's *fiat*, her 'yes' to God, leads her in this instance to hardship, not reward. As newcomers to wherever they washed-up, was their presence welcomed or resented one wonders? Had Joseph already begun to learn his trade as a carpenter? Did he find a job easily, 'foreign' workers are often begrudged, or did he have to do something entirely different and unskilled just to make ends meet? What of the woman with him? Was Mary subject to gossip and speculation? Some people are always looking for a hint of scandal to enliven their day; was there anything in this couple's sudden appearance with a newborn child that suggested some funny business? Many parents have fled with their children to escape violence 'back home' only to encounter opposition in the country where they hoped to find sanctuary. Mindful of the Holy Family, can we offer better?

Mary is forced to beat a hasty retreat from all that is loved and familiar. Her renunciation of all that is held dear, of having to leave her home and family and navigate into the unknown, prefigures the Way of the Cross that her son will map out for all who seek to follow him.<sup>7</sup>

*'Refuge for your children so weak, sure protection all can seek.  
Problems of life you help us to face. Mary, we trust you, hail full of grace.'*

*Ave, ave, ave, Maria!*<sup>8</sup>

Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

The picture is of *The Flight into Egypt*, Giotto di Bondone (1304–1306), Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

1. *Lonely travellers from the stable*, verse 2, © Vincent Uher III, 1997
2. *Matthew* 2:13
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Matthew* 2:15
5. *Ibid.*
6. Page 4, para 2, *Agenzia Fides*, Pontifical Mission Societies, *Missionaries Killed in the Year 2019*, 11 December 2019
6. *Matthew* 2:14
7. *Luke* 14:25-27
8. *Holy Virgin, by God's decree*, verse 4, J. P. Lécot, tr. W. R. Lawrence