

Victory over Death!

by Pierre Gilbert

Associate Professor of Old Testament Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

Christmas. The mere word immediately evokes a myriad of images—snow, evergreens in the living room, decorations, presents, singing, families getting together and foods of all kinds. For me, Christmas calls to mind images from my childhood. My grandfather would invite his children and grandchildren for Christmas dinner. I still remember the centerpiece: a roasted piglet with all the trimmings, even the apple in its mouth. I do not remember what it tasted like, but what a mouth-watering sight that was! To this day, the mere mention of Christmas brings back a flood of warm roasted piglet-centered memories.

Christmas also evokes a strange kind of romanticism, even if only for a few days. Some refer to it as the “Spirit” of Christmas. Television networks serve up innumerable remakes of the quintessential evil rich man, Ebenezer Scrooge, who experiences a miraculous conversion. From the old miserable, tight-fisted creature that he was, Ebenezer turns into a generous, turkey-giving, benevolent old gentleman. The powerful materialistic drive of the holiday season cannot completely overshadow the call to show kindness and compassion to others.

Where does this remarkable sobering effect of Christmas come from? Amid the flurry of glitter, lights, food and presents, there is the baby Jesus. The birth of Christ still has a dynamic and power that the enormous weight of this twenty-first century secular society is simply unable to crush.

For many, the baby Jesus is another cute image, the coziness of which is irresistible. But for the theologically informed, the birth of Jesus represents much more—it is God becoming flesh. The baby Jesus embodies God’s ultimate attempt at showing who he really is.

What could possibly motivate God to adopt such a radical course of action?

The answer is both simple and profound: God has a project.

The divine project

Throughout history, God’s project has manifested itself in various ways. It is a project that predates the creation of the world, spans all of human history and rushes into eternity. God’s purpose is to create a community composed of individuals who have freely chosen to love and serve him. Ultimately, it is an invitation extended to every human being to love God and to become a member of a new people (1 Pet. 2:4-12).

Something, however, went terribly wrong with the human race. God had endowed humanity with free will—particularly the freedom to love or hate God. But at some point, humans chose to disobey God, and something broke in the deepest recesses of the human soul (Gen. 3).

Although no one can quite explain what exactly happened, we know that this terrible event deeply affected the entire course of human history. Evil and suffering entered into the world. Humanity discovered the true significance of freedom—the knowledge of good and evil—but this choice also locked humanity into the sphere of

death. Thus was ushered the age of fear and misery, the age of superstition, idolatry and magic, the age of violence.

This massive setback should have signaled the end of God's project, but God did not abandon his divine undertaking. He proceeded to save humanity.

Why? Because the God of the Bible is a God of salvation (Psalm 107). In the Old Testament, God saved his people through leaders like Moses, Joshua, Samson and the prophets. In the New Testament, God dispatches the ultimate savior, Jesus Christ.

A horrific event just after Jesus' birth provides a profound insight into the major reason behind the manifestation of God as a child.

Slaughter of innocents

Matthew tells a story that illustrates the terrible predicament in which humanity finds itself and gives the reader an insight into the ultimate "alienness" in all of us. It is a story about death in its most revolting shape: the death of little children (Matt. 2:13-23).

The story is well known. Herod the Great learns that magi from the East are looking for a newborn king. The news that a new king is born would create somewhat of a stir in most courts, but this piece of "intelligence" proved to be disastrous in the hands of this particular Herod.

Herod the Great is not a man to be trifled with. He is mentally unstable and deeply evil—a volatile combination. He killed his wife Mariamne simply because he suspects her of unfaithfulness. He had his two sons executed on suspicion of treason. On his deathbed, he will order the members of prominent Jewish families to be gathered and executed the instant his death is official, simply to ensure his subjects will mourn his death.

Herod wants to know where the child is, so that he can kill this pretender to the throne. But Herod can't locate the child. In a moment of characteristically blind fury, he decides to eliminate all the boys, two years old and younger, who live in and around Bethlehem. An estimated 30-40 children are slaughtered.

"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Matt. 2:18). This verse, quoted from a prophecy by Jeremiah, reflects the deep sadness and anguish that resulted from this terrible act of cruelty. In Matthew's day, the Jewish community still preserved a vivid recollection of that painful episode. Matthew's audience would still deeply grieve upon hearing this story.

The Herod in us

We modern readers, on the other hand, often read such a text without as much as batting an eye. There is no dramatic description of the murders. We do not hear the mothers' screams of terror nor see the desperate attempts of the men to protect their children. It happened such a long time ago. It is difficult to feel the full impact of the events that transpire in this text.

But to understand what Matthew wishes to communicate about Jesus, we must feel the pain of this story. We must feel the sharp stab of pain to understand why Matthew included it and grasp the significance of his message.

This isn't really that hard to do. These 2000-year-old deaths are not as far removed as we might think. The darkness and alienness of Herod's evil still exist today.

Herod today: three modern stories of pain

A little girl. In the early 1980s, when I was a pastor in Waterloo (a small town in the eastern townships of the province of Quebec), a friend and I decided to visit the homes of people who had sent their kids to a nearby Christian camp the previous summer. On one visit, we dropped in on a woman who was taking care of three foster children.

As I entered the living room, I noticed a young girl of about seven years old playing in the kitchen. (I subsequently learned she was in fact 13 years old.) As soon as I sat on the sofa, this girl ran towards me, literally jumped on my lap and held onto me as if her life depended on it. After a little while, she let go and went back to the kitchen.

It hadn't taken me long to notice that she was physically and mentally handicapped. Her foster mother later told us that this little girl wasn't born this way. Her condition had resulted from severe physical and emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of family members. She had been fair game for those who should have extended love and protection. Evidently, her tormenters had figured out what would kill her and stopped short. It has been almost 20 years since my encounter with the little girl, and my heart still aches for her.

Two little boys. In the same foster home, there were twin boys, about five years old. They too had encountered evil. Their father had abandoned them at birth, and their mother lived in the clutches of drug addiction and resorted to stripping in area bars to survive. Occasionally, these children were locked up in an empty barn with little food and water, sometimes for three days at a time. By the time they were rescued by child welfare services, they were terrorized, profoundly traumatized and psychologically scarred by their experience.

An older man: Many years ago, I met an older couple. The wife had recently become a Christian. The husband didn't mind her newfound religious fervour, but it wasn't for him. Over time, he and I nevertheless became good friends.

He had a tendency to make fun of the fact that I was a "man of the cloth." His jabs were relentless. "Where is your collar? Did you lose it?" he'd joke. Or "I hope you said your prayers this morning—you look like you need them." Comments every pastor loves to hear.

After a while, however, he began to ask some questions about the Christian faith. I tried to explain to him why Christ died and what his resurrection meant. I knew this man was on the verge of making a commitment to Christ, but he could not bring himself to do it.

Since he pestered me with his clergy jokes, I felt uncharacteristically free to pester him with my questions: "Why? Why won't you accept the forgiveness God wants to extend to you?" I'd keep asking him.

"I can't! And that's all there is to it," he'd answer.

One day, I insisted on asking him what was real problem. To my surprise, that day he told me.

"An accident," he kept repeating. "It was an accident."

As he spoke, I realized he was seeing a scene he had played in his head thousands of times. Right in front of me, the nightmare was unfolding all over again.

My friend was a war veteran, stationed in Europe during World War II. It was in the final days of the war, and military intelligence had determined that German soldiers were hiding in a house nearby. He and a few other men had been given the mission to neutralize them. The soldiers surrounded the house, broke down the door and began shooting everything in sight.

But it was still dark, and they could not see well. Once the dust settled, they made a horrific discovery. There were no German soldiers; only children and a few women. At that moment, this man's soul was ushered into hell.

"That's why," said my friend, "I don't deserve God's forgiveness. I don't deserve to live."

I didn't know what to say. Finally, I told him again what he could not accept—that God loved him, and Christ died for the sins of the whole world, including his own, so that he might live.

"Today is a good day to come home," I told him.

On that day, my old friend did come home. For 40 years, this man had been doing penance. For 40 years, he had been slowly killing himself to atone for his sins. Without Christ, this is what we do. But on that day, he quit doing penance. He found forgiveness and peace.

Behold the horror

Sooner or later, we must face the reality of who we are in all of its horror. The abuse and death of children reminds us most vividly, perhaps even most cruelly, of what sin has done to us. As we ponder these incidents and others like it, we are compelled to ask, *What is wrong with us?*

As this question screams from our souls, we despair and we grieve, for we know too well that the moral disease that afflicts us is rooted beyond our reach. Can someone deliver us from what we have become (Rom. 7:24)?

Matthew inserts this horrible story in his gospel to compel the reader to ask this question. When the Jews read the story of the slaughter of the little ones, Matthew knew that something would grab them in the gut. They would be reminded of the ultimate reason for the coming of the Messiah, and they too would ask, *Who shall deliver us from death?*

The stories I have told bring out the cold and harsh reality of what sin has done to human nature. For a few moments, we too feel the choking weight of sin, and we too ask, *Who shall deliver us from the horror of death?*

Unfortunately, for a lot of people in our world, there is no answer. They look towards the heavens, and the heavens are empty—or are they?

Joy to the world

In Matthew's story, death does not have the final word. Something wonderful is happening.

In the Jeremiah text that Matthew quotes—a text the Jews knew well—the lament is tied to a promise of salvation. Right after the lament comes the words: "This is what the Lord says: 'Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,' declares the Lord. 'They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future,' declares the Lord. 'Your children will return to their

own land” (Jer. 31:16-17). Jeremiah emphatically indicates that there is hope beyond death and suffering.

Although he does not quote Jeremiah’s promise, Matthew nevertheless applies the promise of hope found in Jeremiah’s text to the horror of the human condition highlighted by the slaughter of the little ones: “After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead’” (Matt. 2:19-20).

Those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead. These words remind us that in the end evil did not triumph. In these words lies a powerful promise of hope. The victory of the one who faced opposition and death in childhood is the guarantee that he will ultimately be victorious.

But this will not simply be some triumph over an evil ruler or a malevolent system. As incisively painful as sin, pain and death might be for us now, the story of **Jesus’** victory over Herod is the promise that one day death will be engulfed in a hurricane of life. It is the promise that one day we shall be transformed.

Christmas is much more than a time to party and to cultivate good feelings about others. The celebration of our savior’s birth is the promise that death, pain, old age, disease and evil will be eradicated and will forever fade into nothingness.

It is indeed a Merry Christmas!