

there is a deeper reality, which is light and ultimate security. A reality which is love. A love that knows the depth of human suffering; to its very darkest and deepest depth.

This little child came not to confirm our false securities, but to show us a way through the most ultimate security. As the letter to the Hebrews has it:

he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.

We are reminded, just a few short days after Christmas, that we cannot take the securities of the world for granted. Our hope does not lie in houses built on sand, but on a love that comes down as God becomes incarnate in a human life of love, revealing to us the truth of our salvation. The full presence, the abundance of that love is beyond all telling. It captures us up into a way of being that holds us in a deeper security, a fullness of joy, than the world can ever give.

This gives us the deepest, truest joy of all. So may faith, hope and love keep us in the fullness of God's presence as this new year begins.

One day after Christmas and the Church remembers the first martyr, St Stephen. Three days after, we remember the Holy Innocents – all those children under two who were slaughtered by Herod in his blind and calculating rage to eliminate even the suggestion of a rival.

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.

A rude wake up after the family, children-centred festivities; a brutal reminder that our nice Christmassy time belies a different reality. That the birth of the Christchild in the world is not set about by frivolous peace and mince pies, but challenges the powers that be, with dire consequences. Rachel's lament for lost children becomes the cry of women through all ages, and throughout the world today who have suffered the grief beyond our most dreaded fear. Here we are, still in the 12 days of Christmas, and Christ's birth does not let us romanticise, or trivialise, or domesticate the enormity of what this birth means for the world.

The story of the flight into Egypt is only found in the Gospel of Matthew which leads some to suggest that it didn't really happen – and indeed, who knows the reality? It does, though, give a richer depth to the significance of Jesus, particularly in the minds of the Jewish audience for whom Matthew principally wrote. For those of you interested, this kind of interpretation of the bible – the New Testament in the light of the Old – is a typological reading. Typological interpretation takes one story and reads its significance in the light of other figures or events, thereby deepening its meaning. For at the mention of Egypt their thoughts would have immediately gone to Joseph, and then Moses, and the ancient history of the

captivity of the Hebrew race in Egypt. It was Moses, that great lawgiver, who led the people out of slavery into the promised land, and now, this Jesus, he also was born to set the people free.

Free from what? Free to what? We are taken to the heart of the reason for Jesus' birth, his turbulent life and death, and his triumph over death. What does it mean to be free, to be saved in the name of Jesus Christ?

Today is the first day of 2017. A new year has dawned. It's perhaps the most anxious passing of the old and birth of the new year that I can remember. All the commentators worth their salt are talking of Trump and Brexit and how the implications of those votes of 2016 will unfold. Months, years ahead of Brexit negotiations, with as yet an uncertain outcome; but which may indeed see the implosion of the European Union, and the resetting of a political map that has served us since the end of the 2nd World War.

Certainly the UK - or will the UK survive in its present form? Certainly Britain will need to forge new trade alliances around the world, which will take time and may well mean our prosperity as a nation is undermined in the long meantime. And who knows what Trump will do? He who tweets his thoughts before he's thought them?

Instability and insecurity are two states of being that may well become more familiar. We've been used to seeing families fleeing for their lives from cities under siege. We've seen how fragile life can be. I've found myself wondering that perhaps the default security I have always known is not a given that will last for ever. As the world faces the increasing challenges of global warming – will we ever be able to put that into reverse, or are we going to have to cope with temperature gauges that continue to rise, with ice caps melting until they have gone, and the ecosystems they support

gone too? Perhaps we all face a future that will take us back into dark ages? Who knows?

And then, what sort of person will I be? Will I be reduced to a short brutal life, as Hobbes thought our natural state to be? Fighting for scarce resources with former friends? The end of constitutional democracy as it has served us so long, and a descent into populism and the rise of leaders who have arbitrary power – tyrants, like Herod?

Who knows?

Isaiah prophesied into just such a world. He talked to a people who remembered slavery, the captivity of Babylon, the brutality of an evil regime. He reminded them of the gracious deeds of God, the abundance of his steadfast love. How it was not a messenger or angel but his presence that saved them. That in his love and pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

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Presence. It's a rich, abundant word. We all know what it's like to be in the presence of someone we hold in great respect. We know they are there; we feel their presence. Their presence. It fills the room. How much more is this true of God? God's presence fills the world.

God's presence was fully present in that little baby that fled with his parents down the old China silk road to Egypt. God became human in all God's glorious presence so that we might know that darkness and chaos is not our only fate. For however dark and chaotic the human condition can become,