

*The Flight into Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents.*

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Today's Gospel contains two stories: The Flight into Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents. Likely we've all seen icons and paintings depicting these, with the Mother of God holding her baby and riding on a donkey, and Joseph leading them on their way, and other paintings depicting the slaughter. The Gospel is very pertinent in this time of mass migration and flight from violence and war and poverty. As we know all too well these days, many innocents are being slaughtered in the Middle East and elsewhere, and hundreds of thousands, millions even, are on the move in efforts to escape.

We realize, of course, that these migrations are not pretty, not elegant or refined like the best religious art depicting the Flight into Egypt. They are dangerous, desperate, unhealthy ventures, prone to hunger, thirst, disease, attacks from bandits, exploitation, and more. We can all think of variations and additions to this theme. Forced migration is a catastrophe for everyone involved, for the migrants and often also for people at the migrants' destination. Forced migration has occurred in American history as well. The nineteenth century expulsions of Indians from their lands in the southeast, and their resettlement in the west, are well known. Large-scale voluntary migration has

occurred as well, notably from the southern states to the cities of the north. We may think of the steady influx of millions of people into California, basically since the 1930s, as a mass migration from other states and from countries to the south. Migration is a constant theme in history, and the story of the Flight into Egypt is an archetypal tale whose pattern can be applied to much of it. What is different in the Gospel story, is that the Holy Family has the option to return to their country of origin. Most modern migrants can't return, or don't want to; some are forced to return, as we know. In any case, migration is generally a one-way trip for most people, whose final destination is uncertain.

At the time of the Nativity, the Holy Family were homeless, and they were homeless again in Egypt. How well this resonates with the contemporary situation! I think of the video clips on television, of people stranded at borders, camping out in the open, waiting for a chance to move on to something better. The Holy Family may have had experiences like this, or worse, since they had to cross the Sinai desert to reach Egypt.

What can we learn from the story of the Flight into Egypt? And how can we apply what we learn to today's situation?

The Holy Family is God-protected, and led by God to safety, where His will for them can be fulfilled. But his will for them is being fulfilled, even in danger. There is no moment when God is absent. There is danger at both ends of the journey, at their point of origin and on their return to Israel.

There is danger as they cross the Sinai, into an unknown situation. But in all situations, God is present. There are clear statements that prophecies are being fulfilled, that, no matter what the danger, ultimately there is no getting in the way of what God intends for the Holy Family.

Every family on the move today in the migrations from the Middle East and elsewhere, is a holy family. They deserve to be seen as God-protected and God-led, as much as the Holy Family of the Gospel. It is our plain duty to do what we can to ease their situation, to welcome them and care for them. It is clear from the Judgment of the Nations in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, that when we welcome the stranger, we welcome Jesus himself. And if we don't welcome them, we place ourselves under judgment. It is startling to see the uneasiness, the hostility, in purportedly Christian lands, including our own, to migrants from Syria and elsewhere. We Christians must not let ourselves be overtaken by this hostility, and instead look at the situation with God's eyes, so to speak, and act as He would act, and as our Lord would expect us to act.

The Massacre of the Innocents is another archetypal tale. It describes situations very common in our world. In the Gospel, the Flight into Egypt is in response to a clear threat from Herod. An angel warns Joseph of the approaching calamity; at the very least, this is a way of saying that Joseph suspected the coming danger, and fled with his family. The twentieth century saw massacres of innocents: the Armenians, the Nazi genocides, the war in Rwanda, and more. We have the ongoing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, and

American gun violence, which leads to the deaths of thousands of innocents every year; there are many more such situations, historical and current. It is difficult to know what to say about this very dark side of human nature, when the better side of human nature is overtaken by tribalism, ethnic hatred, religious division, just plain greed for other peoples' land, and so on.

We Christians, who believe in the saving power of the Cross and the overcoming of death in the Resurrection, are compelled to affirm our faith that death and destruction are not the last words in the story. Today's Gospel reading is followed by the return of the Holy Family from Egypt after the massacre; that is to say, return to life as God intends it is possible; new life is possible, God will not abandon his people; he commands us not to abandon them either. Ultimately, God will guide his people into the promised land, to the new heaven and the new earth. May we accompany them on their return to Him. May He include us in that happy migration. Amen.