

Refrain Your Voice from Weeping, Rachel

A sermon about the children of Bethlehem

A sermon by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, December 30, 2018

“Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for they shall come back from the land of the enemy.” Jeremiah 31.16

You may wonder, when you hear the account of the boys who were put to death by Herod, why it is said to fulfil the prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children and heard in Ramah. Rachel was not the ancestor of these children in Bethlehem, but Leah. Ramah is a town twenty miles north of Bethlehem, with no obvious connection to this story.

The passage in Jeremiah in the literal sense actually refers to the Jews being taken captive to Babylon. They were gathered first at Ramah (see Jeremiah 40.1) and taken from there into exile. Rachel is the one who mourns because, as the beloved wife of Jacob, she is the idealized mother of all Israel.

In Jeremiah’s prophecy she is comforted and told that her children will return from the land of the enemy. In the Matthew account, however, the comfort is not mentioned, only inconsolable weeping. The only comfort is that, unknown to the mothers of Bethlehem, the target of Herod’s wrath has escaped to safety.

According to the New Testament apocryphal work “*The Martyrdom of Matthew*” Herod killed 3,000 children in this event. The Byzantine liturgy places the number at 14,000 and the Syrian tradition says 64,000 innocent children were killed. More recent scholarship, however, asserts that the population of Bethlehem at that time would have been about 300, and the number of male children, two years old or

younger, would have actually been about six or seven (*The slaughter of the innocents – Historical fact or legendary fiction?* By Gordon Franz, 2009). This would also explain why it would have been easy for the shepherds to locate the infant Lord on the night of His birth.



The real scale of the tragedy, however, was not in the number of victims, as terrible as that was, but in what it represented.

There was no spiritual truth remaining.

The true reason why Rachel is mentioned is that in the internal sense she is the one who loved most what Herod wished to destroy. Rachel stands for the interior love of the truth, a love truly from the heart. Both Ramah and Bethlehem represent

spiritual truth. The Lord came into the world, born in Bethlehem, to bring the light of spiritual truth, which had almost been obliterated by the hells, and which those represented by Herod would have loved to snuff out at its birth.

When Herod put to death the infant boys of Bethlehem, it represented the seemingly final extinction of truth in the church - a cause for such great sorrow that we are told that heaven itself was threatened (*True Christianity 3, Apocalypse Exp. 695.15*).

But the Word of God born into the world was kept safe, spirited away in the night to Egypt. So Rachel’s bitter weeping would be comforted, for the truth can never actually be extinguished or lost.

Our topic is this miraculous preservation of the truth

that Rachel loves, and how the Lord leads each person, and the human race as a whole, so that her tears are dried and her children return to be united with her. This is what this account of the little boys of Bethlehem, and the Lord's escape, is about.

A church's teachings are like its sons.

The birth of children, and the preciousness of those children, is a frequent theme in the Word. Few things can cause greater heartbreak for parents than the lack of a child or the loss of a child. In the New Testament, the joy at the Lord's birth, and the fear when He is threatened, reiterate that theme.

In the internal sense sons depict the doctrine of the church, or the church's body of teaching (*Arcana Coelestia* 2584, *Faith* 59). It is like a child because it is fragile and needs caring for, and because if it is lost or damaged the church cannot live and has no future. You would think that the future church itself would be the offspring of the present church, just as actual children are. But a church's teachings really are its future, for the spiritual church is always shaped and formed according to its faith. We read:

"As everyone knows, the church depends on its body of teaching and its body of teaching is based on the Word. Nevertheless, it is not the body of teaching itself but its integrity and purity, and therefore an understanding of the Word, that forms the church. The church in miniature that is in us as individuals is also formed and established not by a body of teaching but by our faith and by our living our faith." *True Christianity* 245

It is really the life according to faith that makes the church, but this is not possible without doctrine. The relationship between a parent and a child has a poignancy and fierce love that may be hard to see in the relationship between a church and its doctrine. But the analogy should help to illustrate the urgency of the relationship. Just as Rachel is inconsolable at the loss of her sons, so the church would be truly bereft without its beliefs. The number of its followers may shrink or grow, but without the integrity and purity of its body of teaching, and the life according to it, the church has no real existence.

The flight to Egypt

In our story the Lord escapes to Egypt, a frequent safe haven in the Word. In several stories people look to Egypt for safety in hardship, and then return to Canaan, often enriched by their time there.

The story describes the flight to Egypt, followed by an attempt to return to Bethlehem when Herod dies, and ending with the Lord in Nazareth, where He is to grow to maturity. What do these things mean?

In the Word people typically go to Egypt during famines, because famines stand for the lack of truth, and Egypt represents instruction. In this case the truth is not just scarce in Israel, its very existence is threatened. It stands for a time in the life of the church when the Word is misunderstood and falsified, when evil practices are condoned, and when the truth is marginalized and persecuted.

Rachel's lamentation and bitter weeping for her sons represents sorrow because of this state of the world. Specifically, it represents sorrow that there is no spiritual truth in the church. For Rachel represents the internal affection for truth, truth loved deeply and in life, truth which is not so much truth as good, a love of the neighbor having its origin in the solid truths of the Word (*see Arcana Coelestia* 3906). This is not so much the knowing of an answer as a love of an answer, or really a loving of a way of life. Her weeping in Ramah underlines this, because Ramah particularly means the truth from love (*Arcana Coelestia* 4592.10).

Egypt is the first stop in the journey.

When Moses was a young man in Egypt, and had killed an Egyptian and was found out, he escaped to Midian (*Exodus* 2.15). We are told that this represents the person of the church, when faced with hard dilemmas, escaping to the basic truths of the Word, and finding refuge there in the things which they know to be true (*Arcana Coelestia* 6773).

Escaping to Egypt is different than escaping to Midian. Egypt is not basic truths, but rather the knowledge of all the goods and truths of the Church; not an interior affection of them, as with Rachel, but simply the memory knowledge of them. The knowledges of the Church, of the truths and goods of the Word, are tremendously enriching. They are both a shelter from harm and want, and a way of gaining the means to return to the struggle and fight successfully (*Arcana Coelestia* 1463, 3368).

This means that the beginning of our own rescue from the threat that Herod represents is to be found in instruction and scholarship. We need to know what the Word teaches and what it doesn't teach. We need to be clear about what we stand for. We need to be educated in the truth.

The true answers to Rachel's sorrow, however, are not to be found in Egypt. Egypt merely lays the groundwork for the path to salvation. We need to do more than learn.

This is why the characters in the Word never stay in Egypt, but leave there to go to the Promised Land. So the angel of the Lord appears again to Joseph in a dream, saying:

"Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead."

They are headed, presumably, to Bethlehem. But when they learn that the son of Herod rules in Jerusalem they are afraid to go near. We read:

"And he came and dwelt in a city of Galilee named Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene." Matthew 2.22,23

Why do they go to Nazareth?

There is no prophecy that says anything like this about being a *Nazarene*. One possibility is that *Nazirites* in the Old Testament prefigured the Lord. Scholars, however, point out that although the words *Nazarite* and *Nazarene* sound similar to our English ears, they are not so persuasively close in Hebrew or Greek.

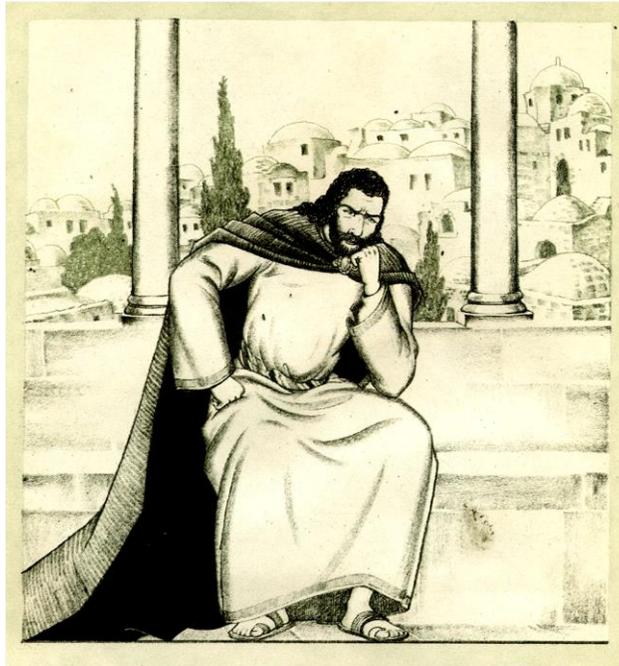
There are a number of other possible explanations for this statement, but one that may be relevant to the theme of Herod's persecution is that the Lord's growth to maturity in Nazareth, which is in Galilee, is related to the prophecy *"In Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light"* (Isaiah 9).

A key to understanding this is the idea that the word *Nazarene* is not a compliment but an epithet. In John 1 Nathanael said, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* The name may actually be a fulfillment of the prophecy that He would be *"despised and rejected"* (Isaiah 53).

The Lord being a Nazarene may mean that the true answers to life's issues come from a place in our

life that we do not hold in high esteem. The Word may not seem to hold the answers. Yet there is actually no other source.

In the culture of the fallen church we do not hold the Word and the things of religion in high esteem. We often subject them to doubt and criticism. The promise of the New Church is that in the long run they will nevertheless be the source of our peace.



The route of the escape and nurturing of the Divine Truth among us is a circuitous one. When the Lord's presence is threatened by Herod and all that he represents, we go first to Egypt, where we learn. The expected result of this learning is to return us to the innocent state where we began, the deep love of what is good and true that is Bethlehem. But it isn't so simple, because the threats to our spiritual life don't just go away. So this life grows to maturity in a new place within us, far off Galilee. There its true value is hidden

from us until the time is right.

Your children shall come back

When the time is right, however, we recognize more and more clearly the value of what the Lord was born on earth to deliver to us. These are the truths that lead us out of Galilee on the road to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the place that the captives always longed for, and Jerusalem is the goal for every person, because it stands for heaven's peace, the ultimate comfort to Rachel's tears.

The Lord is our shepherd on this route. Just as He guided Mary and Joseph away from danger, He protects the precious truths of the church every step of the way, as He brings us all together. He will not let Herod extinguish them. As Jeremiah says:

"He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock. For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of one stronger than he. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, streaming to the goodness of the Lord...and they shall sorrow no more at all." Jeremiah 31.10-13 AMEN

Readings from the Word

Jeremiah 31.15-17

Thus says the Lord: *“A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, Because they are no more.”*

Thus says the Lord: *“Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; For your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future, says the Lord, that your children shall come back to their own border.”*

Matthew 2.13-23

Now when the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, *“Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.”* ¹⁴When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, ¹⁵and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, *“Out of Egypt I called My Son.”*

¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

¹⁸*“A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

¹⁹But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰saying, *“Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child’s life are dead.”* ²¹Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. ²³And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, *“He shall be called a Nazarene.”*

Apocalypse Explained 695.15

Rachel weeping for her sons” refers to the infant boys put to death in Bethlehem by command of Herod. But what this means has not heretofore been known. The meaning is that when the Lord came into the world there was no spiritual truth remaining. For Rachel represented the internal spiritual church, and Leah the external natural church. “Bethlehem” stands for the spiritual, and “the boys put to death” stand for truth from a spiritual origin. That there was no spiritual truth any longer remaining is what is meant by “Rachel weeping for her sons, refusing to be comforted for her sons, because they are not.”

[16] That from now on there will be no grief on that account, because the Lord has been born, from whom there will be a New Church that will be in truths from spiritual affection, is meant by the words “refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your labor.” The “reward” means heaven for those who will be of that church from the spiritual affection of truth. The “labor” means the Lord’s combats against the hells and the subjugation of the hells so that a New Church may be established. That the New Church will be established in the place of the one that perished is meant by “they shall return from the land of the enemy, and there is hope for the future.” Also by “your sons shall return to their own border.” “To return from the land of the enemy” means to be brought out of hell. “Hope for the future” means the end of the former church and the beginning of the new. And “the sons shall return to their own border” means that spiritual truths will exist with those who will be of that New Church.

