

# **THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON**

**29 December 2024**



**St. Peter's Notting Hill**

**Kensington Park Rd, London W11 2PN**

Matthew 2: 13-23

Within the church, today is often nicknamed "Getaway Sunday".

That's because many Vicars, who have been working their socks off throughout Advent with

- Carol Services
- Midnight Christmas Eve Services
- Christmas Day Services

And take their chance to get away for some well-deserved R & R.

As you can see our hardworking Vicar, Pat, is now enjoying his R & R with his family in South Africa.

Even though he is 6,000 miles away, I do think he deserves a pat on the back (pun intended!)

As do the whole team here for the spectacular success of our Advent and Christmas Services here.

Two weeks ago, we had an amazing weekend here.

Over 800 people came to our Open-Air Carol Service in the streets on Saturday 14 December.

The following morning, we had a well attended 10.30am Service for about 70 people.

And that evening another 360 people crammed in here for our Candlelit Carol Service.

So well over 1200 people were in this church on that Pre-Christmas weekend.

Too often our  
negative,  
secular  
media likes to report that the church is in decline.

Well not here it ain't!

Indeed, the official statistics tell us that most churches have reported a rise in attendance figures this past year.

But faith is not a numbers game.

We are here as the old hymn puts it:

"Through all the changing scenes of life in trouble and in joy."

That is our calling.

Only in the unreal world of fairytales and Hollywood movies does everyone live happily ever after.

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Our reading today is a salutary reminder that soon after the first Christmas the Holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph were not living happily ever after.

They were having a rough and dangerous time.

Christian persecution started at the time of Christ's birth.

Sadly, it remains an evil and growing force in our 21st century world.

And it first arrived on the scene in a lethally murderous form as reported in the first verse of our reading when Joseph was warned:

“Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

What was going on here?

King Herod was an

- insecure
- superstitious and
- brutal tyrant ruler.

We know from earlier verses in Matthew's Gospel that he was spooked by the arrival in Jerusalem of the mysterious Magi or Wise Men asking:

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

Why did this strange question cause Herod to panic?

And was he really so bestial a King as to order the killing of all the boys under the age of two in Bethlehem.

Roman history answers these questions.

Herod was a monster.

He had form when he came to ordering massacres.

In various previous episodes he had slaughtered 300 of his own Court officers.

He had executed half the councillors in the Sanhedrin.

He had murdered several members of his own family.

So ordering the killing of all the boy babies under two years old in the small town of Bethlehem was no big deal for Herod.

It would have meant the slaughter of no more than 20 or 30 little boys.

Terrible for them and for their parents but it went unreported in the annals of the Roman Empire.

We would not even know about it unless Matthew had turned into a post-Christmas horror story in his Gospel.

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Matthew's Gospel was often called the Jewish Gospel by theologians.

He was writing primarily for a Jewish audience striving to convince them that Jesus was the true Messiah the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies.

To this day, alas, many Jews do not believe this.

But to prove his point – here in our reading – Matthew drops in fulfilment quotations from the Old Testament.

“Out of Egypt I have called my son” comes from the Prophet Amos.

“The weeping in Ramah” verses come from the Prophet Jeremiah.

These quotes mean little for us.

But they would have been well understood by a First Century Jewish audience.

They were signals that just as God had called the people of Israel out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses

So God was bringing his son Jesus out of Egypt.

This symbolism may seem a bit far-fetched to us.

But it scared Herod.

He was afraid of the prophesy that a potential King of the Jews was about to be born in Bethlehem.

That was why he started a savage persecution killing all the new born babies in the town.

But thanks to the warning to Joseph in a dream by an Angel the baby Jesus escaped.

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It was worth reflecting for a moment on the high-risk element of Christmas.

- Angels
- Shepherds
- Wisemen
- And the baby sleeping sweetly in the manger with an oxen standing by

are the happy and gentle side of the story.

But on the dark side of Christmas there were dangerous risks.

Mary could easily have been stoned to death as a disgraced, unmarried mother – a fate which often befell single girls that got pregnant in the primitive hill country of Judea.

Joseph and his family might easily have got lost on their long and perilous journey into Egypt.

Jesus nearly was slaughtered by Herod.

But with the help of the mighty hand of God the father

Jesus made it through the dark side of Christmas.

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Alas, one part of the dark side of Christmas is still with us: Persecution.

If you thought we had moved on from the days of Herod and Hitler when brutal persecutions took place against people due to their

- ethnicity,
- race
- or their faith

you would be mistaken.

As in Biblical times it is often the Jews who are the worst sufferers.

Antisemitism is a growing cancer around the world.

So also is anti-Christian persecution.

This is a subject dear to my heart because until last year I was for over two decades President of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) a charity

specialising in advocacy for the human rights of Christians and people of other faiths who suffer from persecution.

CSW's experts, who work steadily with the

UN,

United States Congress,

UK and

European Parliaments and other bodies

say that religious persecution is steadily on the increase today.

The effects can be horrific in countries like

- Iran,
- Nigeria,
- Libya,
- Pakistan,
- Sudan,
- Afghanistan
- and North Korea.

I could tell you many persecution horror stories about my visits to various countries all over the world when I was President of CSW.

Many of them took place in Africa where extremists frequently carry out

- kidnappings,
- rapes,
- tortures
- and killings of innocent Christians particularly Christian women and schoolgirls

Such outrages are sporadic and often go unreported.



What is more worrying is the systemic suppression of freedom of religion in countries that we think of relatively acceptable members of the international community, particularly China.

Let's focus for a moment on China which I have visited more than a dozen times in recent years.

Christian persecution there is cruel, complex and covert.

Although it occasionally erupts into

- the burning down of churches
- and the imprisonment of pastors and members of their congregation

the general trend of President Xi Jinping's policies has to be to place:

- More and more restrictions
- Registration requirements
- Reporting rules
- And a rising tide of secret police surveillance on churches using latest technology.

Big Brother is

- Watching
- Bullying
- Suppressing
- Harrassing
- And closing down faith communities all the time in China.

It is a country where fear rules faith often with dire consequences for individual believers.

For example, please do pray for the devoted Christian, Jimmy Lai, who is now spending his fourth Christmas in solitary confinement, denied access to a Priest or Communion. His only crime is to have spoken out for the Human Rights of others in the newspapers he owns.

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What should we individual Christians here at St Peter's Notting Hill try to do about religious persecution by Communist Governments such as

- China,
- North Korea
- and Cuba (three of the world's worst persecutors)

Or by other states where religious persecution flourishes.

You could support or help any one of the acclaimed charities who fight the good fight against religious persecution.

In the UK those charities include:

- Open Doors
- CSW
- Release International
- Help the Persecuted
- Christian Freedom International.

Or more simply you could just pray.

But how to pray?

One of my friends from China who I have met several times at International Conferences is Brother Yun, often known as the "Heavenly Man".

He told me as he told many of his audiences:

Don't pray for the persecution in China to stop.

Pray for us to be steadfast in our faith when we are persecuted.

That attitude which demonstrates a line of courage which runs all the way from Paul and the early Christians who suffered dreadful persecutions and imprisonment as described in the Acts of the Apostles.

These persecutions are still going strong today in our 21st century world.

However, I dare to say that Brother Yun is not right to say:

*Don't pray for the persecution to stop.*

Let me tell you an encouraging personal story which is a mysterious and compelling example of the power of prayer to stop persecution.

Going back to the mists of time to my days as a schoolboy when I was about 15 I was prepared for Confirmation by a school chaplain.

Amazingly I still have my Confirmation preparation notebook from those days. Here it is (hold it up).

The year was 1957 – 67 years ago!!

Now this particular school chaplain, a rather inspirational figure, had an interest, almost an obsession with religious persecution in countries behind the Iron Curtain.

Somehow or other during the school holidays he managed to make visits to countries in the Soviet Union such as:

- Romania
- Hungary
- Czechoslovakia
- And Poland.

And he came back to his school pulpit and his school Confirmation class with blood curdling stories of about pastors being

- thrown into jail
- tortured
- Or even shot in these countries

Now my school chaplain stories made quite an impression on me.

So much so in my Confirmation notebook there were some blank pages headed 'People and causes to pray for'.

And in my spindly teenage handwriting I wrote down the names of countries which were being persecuted and duly prayed for their persecution to end.

So here in this surviving 1957 Confirmation notebook I wrote down and prayed for religious persecution to end in:

- Romania
- Hungary
- Czechoslovakia
- And Poland.

Guess what?

Today in all those countries religions freedom flourishes.

There is no persecution of Christians and other faiths in any of them.

Such a change seemed utterly impossible in the world of the 1950s when the Soviet Union and its Iron Curtain empire seemed impregnable and unchangeable.

So what I am saying in relation to 21st century persecution is:

"Don't underestimate the power of prayer."

As Alfred Lord Tennyson memorably wrote:

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of".

So God's timing is not our timing. Sometimes we have to be patient.

Religious persecution in

- North Korea,
- China
- or Cuba

is not going to disappear any time soon.

But for God to whom in the words of the old hymn:

"A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone", tyrants will fall, and religious persecution will end – and so we should pray.

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Finally, to get back to our reading, please note that the story of these verses does after all have a happy ending.

Look at verses 19 - 21.

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. ' So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

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As happens so often in life, God tested even his own family.

But he restored them so that Jesus could begin his ministry in Nazareth and Gallilee.

And there Jesus fulfilled not only the prophecies of the Old Testament but the mysterious signs the gifts of

- Gold
- Frankincense
- And Myrrh

which were presented to him by the Magi at the time of his birth.

The Magi and the Feast of Epiphany will be our focus at next Sunday's Service here at St Peter's.

Do come back to hear more of the good news here next Sunday.

**Amen**