Matthew 2:13-23 Into the thick of it!

The Gospel reading this Sunday after Christmas moves us dramatically away from the anticipation of Advent and revelry of Christmas and the holidays to the tenuous and dark days between God’s promises and their fulfilment.

At this point, most of us are probably still recovering from Christmas – trying to get the gift wrappings to fit in the recycle bin, cleaning up after family visits, and looking with concern at the bank balance, which will no doubt have taken a beating. We’re still in holiday mode! It’s almost too soon for us to be thinking about other things. Yet in our reading from Matthew this morning, we’re drawn suddenly away from the gentle joy of the Nativity scene into the reality of the heavy call on Jesus’ life.

Jesus’ life was to be marked by constant tension and struggle – the struggle between God, and the world, the flesh and the devil; and it began for Jesus while he was still a baby.

The first threat to Jesus’ life began after the wise men from the east visited King Herod. Matthew 2:12 tells us, “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” We know from v3, that Herod was frightened when he heard that a new king had been born – even if that King had been sent by God! From Herod’s perspective, there was no room in his kingdom for a rival – even if that rival was a baby! He felt threatened, and as many predatory animals do when threatened, he lashed out in a deadly way.

Herod was angry that the men from the east had somehow intuited his intentions, deliberately disobeying his command to return with the information he needed to dispose of the threat to his throne. So Herod did the next best thing. Working out the age of the child from what the visitors had told him, he figured his throne would be safe if he disposed of all male infants under two years of age.

However, God’s plan was not so easily thwarted. He intervened again, and we read in v 13, “an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Joseph wasted no time – he gathered up his family and fled to Egypt that very night as he was told.

The second threat to Jesus’ life came after Herod had died. In another dream, Joseph was told that those who had wished Jesus dead had perished, and he was to take Jesus and his mother and return to Israel. However, Joseph heard that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod the Great, and he was afraid. Archelaus was a worse tyrant than his father, and to return would mean putting the family’s life in danger.

God continued the conversation, and again in a dream, Joseph was warned not to return to the part of Israel that Archelaus ruled, so Joseph took Mary & Jesus and made home for them in Galilee, in the town of Nazareth, which was outside the jurisdiction of Archelaus.

As an infant Jesus could not act in his own defence. However, God's steady protection and Joseph's faithful obedience combined to ensure his safety in a world full of danger.

Every year, as we celebrate Christmas, the spotlight falls on Mary, doesn’t it? We consider Mary’s willing obedience as she accepts her calling to conceive a child out of wedlock by the Holy Spirit. Yet Joseph is as much a part of the salvation story as Mary.

When we think about Joseph, he was also given a tough call. He was told to go ahead and marry Mary, although all the wagging tongues said she’d been unfaithful. He was told to gather up his family in the dead of night and flee to Egypt, because the king was out to destroy the baby.

Then, after they had been in Egypt for a few years, there was yet another dream. “Time to go, Joseph!”

Sometimes I wonder whether Joseph ever questioned his guidance. By this time, Joseph and Mary would have been well established in their new community, with Joseph working as a carpenter. It would have not been an easy command to obey. But he obeyed nevertheless, not even waiting for daylight.

So Joseph also was a godly and obedient servant. Without his receptivity to the guidance of God, and his willingness to put his own comfort and human reasoning behind him, things may have played out very differently.

As I mentioned in my Christmas sermon, I find it mind blowing to consider that that God chose to use his fallible human children as part of the cosmic event that was the salvation of the world. No doubt he chose as his servants people whose hearts were tuned to him, and whose ways evidenced a life dedicated to God – yet when you think about it, only Jesus was perfect!

And that thought brings us to the present – to our lives as Christians in this day and time.

We too, are called to be servants of God in a spiritually hostile world. We too will do battle with the world, the flesh and the devil, if we are serious about living out our faith.

We might feel that we are not particularly important in the grand scheme of things. Mary certainly felt that. She referred to herself as a ‘lowly handmaiden’ – that’s a servant or slave, someone of very little worth. We might feel we are not gifted enough, or young enough, or mature enough in our faith to be of use to God.

However, as Christians, we need to remember that at our baptism, we were ‘baptised into Christ’. That means we are in Christ, and he is in us. We don’t fulfil his call in our own strength. The very power that raised Christ from the dead lives within us!

As Christ’s life is within us, so is his call is on our lives. What call is that? Essentially, we are called to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. In so doing, we enter the fray that Jesus entered. We become part of a kingdom that is opposed to the world.

We are called to put God and his will first, and ourselves second. That’s what Joseph did; it’s what Mary did; it’s what countless believers through the ages have done, and it is what we are called to do.

So how does this work out in practice?

Well, God mainly works in two ways. He works *in* us, and he works *through* us to bring about his will. Very rarely will God work apart from us.

Working *in* us, he calls us to love him above all else, and so to be like Jesus. In the lesson from 1 John this morning, we read these words: 7”but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” This is metaphorical language, which in essence means that we are to live godly and upright lives, not indulging in anything we might be ashamed of, or might want to hide. As we endeavour to live like this, we gain encouragement from others who are seeking to live the same way.

Question: Is there anything in our behaviour or our attitudes that is not honouring to God? That’s an uncomfortable question to ask, but ‘walking in the light’ means dealing with anything ungodly in our lives. It means we should regularly look at the activities we engage in and ask if God would approve; it means examining our relationships and seeing if there is anyone we are angry with, or are avoiding and making every effort to forgive them; it means looking at our attitudes towards others and checking whether they reflect the love and compassion of God.

If we’re serious about following Jesus, the things which the Bible identifies as ‘sin’ need to be brought before God and dealt with. God will help us do that. The next verse in 1 John says this: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he who is faithful will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Then God desires to work *through* us.

He calls us to love others as we love ourselves. That means to be agents of his love and his justice, and as we reflect this, we affect the world around us. God doesn’t need us to be perfect in order to do that – just available. Both Mary and Joseph were ordinary teenagers, they simply said ‘yes’ to God, and he used them mightily. All of those we might consider the ‘greats’ of Scripture – Moses, David, Paul, the disciples – were all just as flawed as the rest of us. But they answered God’s call, made themselves available – and God used them.

Serving God is not always comfortable. We enter a battle zone. At times we get shot at. We get wounded, and we may even get taken out for a while. But God never abandons us, and ultimately, it’s as we co-operate with him, that he is able to use us to bring about his plan, not only in our lives, but *through our lives* to touch our communities and perhaps even the wider world.

As we move into 2015, may we enter it with a new determination to bring our lives before God, inviting him to take us and use us. Let us renew the promise of our baptism today, which is to ‘shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father’, and allow God to work his out his purposes through us.

Let’s pray.