

THE LAMENTATION AT BETHLEHEM

“Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more”.

Matthew 2: 17, 18

Whenever we celebrate Christmas, we remember the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and we read and sing about “peace on earth” among the people of God’s good pleasure. We partake of the great joy that was shared by the shepherds and others in the little town of Bethlehem.

In this passage, however, we read about the massacre of the infants, about blood on earth, and we are confronted with the great sorrow of those who lived in and around Bethlehem. From peace and quiet to bloodshed and clamour, indeed a very severe contrast! Does it really belong in one and the same Gospel?

When we place the death of these many children over against the birth of that one Child, we ask ourselves, “Why did these children have to die?” Is all this bloodshed not deeply infuriating and totally senseless? Why did the Lord God allow this to happen? Perhaps an even more important question now is: what meaning can it possibly have for us today?

A MEANINGLESS INCIDENT OR MIGHTY PROPHECY?

The matter gains great significance when we read that not only an act of violence is committed, but that prophecy is being fulfilled. It is not just an unfortunate, isolated incident which might have been prevented and which is really quite meaningless, but here the *Word of God* finds fulfillment. King Herod retains his specific responsibility in the affair, but the Lord wishes to use this event to instruct His people unto salvation.

Christmas leads to a crisis, and in that crisis we need consolation. Here the Church of Christ is directed by the lamentation at Bethlehem to its only consolation in the latter days. We will focus on the cause of the lamentation and the content of the consolation.

JEREMIAH AND MATTHEW

You wonder how the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 can be fulfilled in Matthew 2, when there are two totally different situations involved. The cause of the lamentation in Jeremiah is the exile of Judah to Babel. Certainly, in the war which preceded the actual exile, there will have been casualties (and even infants may have been killed), but how can that compare with the massacre of infants which is perpetrated by the soldiers of King Herod? How can the one lamentation be linked to the other?

I may mention that also in Matthew 2 mention is made of an exile, namely the exile of Christ to Egypt. In Jeremiah 31 the battle is directed against the people of God, who are forced into exile because of their sins. In Matthew 2, however, the battle is against the Messiah of God, who is forced into exile although He is without sin. But we may leave that matter for the time being, although it’s good to remember the connection.

In order to understand our text well, we have to pose a few important questions concerning the link-up of Jeremiah 31 and Matthew 2. What do Ramah and Rachel

have to do with Bethlehem Ephratah? Why does the Holy Spirit lead Matthew to refer to Jeremiah 31?

A MATTER OF GEOGRAPHY?

It cannot be a matter of geography. It is true that Rachel is buried near Bethlehem, but that hardly seems to the point. Ramah was not close to Bethlehem; as far as we know, it was a town on the border between Northern Israel and Judah. The whole point of the prophecy in Jeremiah is that Rachel stands at Ramah on the border of Northern Israel (Ephraim) and Judah, and bemoans the exile of *both* kingdoms, of the *entire* covenant people. She looks to the North, and sees the children of Israel gone; she looks to the South, and again sees the children of Israel being led away into captivity, and her lamentation is great: O my children, my children! Where have all my children gone? The cause of Rachel's poignant and bitter lamentation is the utter destruction of the covenant people.

The cause of the lamentation in Bethlehem Ephratah is different. King Herod thought that he had made a satisfactory arrangement with the "wise men," but they did not return to Jerusalem to tell him more about the "king of the Jews." So Herod sent in his henchmen with specific orders to kill all the possible candidates for the title – all the male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding region who were two years old and under. Scholars have estimated the population of that area at around two to three thousand, and they think that at most one hundred infants were killed. But that is still a formidable number. It is a mass-murder, a terrible infanticide.

HEROD'S CRUELTY

Herod was known for his furious rage and extreme cruelty. He even killed his own son when he thought that this son was a potential danger to him. The emperor Augustus is reported to have said of Herod, "It is better to be Herod's swine than Herod's son." Indeed, his own family was afraid of him. This murder of infants in Bethlehem shows his deeply cruel character. A whole area is suddenly steeped in grief; hundreds of people are beyond themselves with sorrow; they cannot be comforted.

You must try to picture this. The soldiers are going from house to house, dragging out the infants, and slaughtering them before their parents' eyes. The parents are exclaiming that their son is not "the king of the Jews," but the soldiers are oblivious to their protests and brutal in their actions: orders from headquarters, next house! Picture the sheer devastation, the utter hopelessness of the people left behind with the bodies of the dead children, and perhaps with the bodies of those parents who tried to defend their children's lives. There is wailing and loud lamentation, and Matthew directs us to a similar lamentation in the days of Jeremiah.

Similarities can indeed be noted. There is the suddenness of the happening and the swiftness of execution. There is the merciless and brutal campaign. There is the

impossibility of defence and of escape. There is the utter devastation when the troops have left.

WHY RACHEL?

The question is: why is *Rachel* mentioned here? You will recall that Rachel's two sons were Joseph and Benjamin, but Bethlehem was situated in Judah. The reason for mentioning Rachel is that she as one of the *mothers of Israel* so particularly suffered anxiety and grief for her children. She cried out during her life because the LORD first did not give her children, and she died when her second child was born. Rachel, intense, brooding, proud, and yet brought so low because of her children.

Both in Jeremiah 31 and in Matthew 2, Rachel is the symbol of the mother of Israel who suffers anxiety and grief because of her children. It is a grief for the losses suffered in the struggle of the ages, in the history of redemption. When you hear the name Rachel, you think of the struggle to bring forth *covenant children* (Genesis), of the sorrow when the covenant children are carried away into captivity, and now, of the clamour in Bethlehem Ephratah for the covenant children massacred. Rachel embodies the struggle for the seed of the covenant and the sorrow over the seed of the covenant.

When you hear the name Rachel, you think of Jacob, who loved her, the father of Israel according to the flesh. When you hear the name Jacob, you remember his opponent Esau, the disobedient covenant child whose seed became an enemy of the covenant people. When you hear the name Esau, you remember that Herod was an Edomite. Now we have come full circle.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Rachel mourns the loss of her children. But Matthew must put the event in the wider context of the history of salvation. There is a tremendous struggle going on through the ages. It was there already in the days of Esau and Jacob, Rachel and Leah. It became even clearer in the days of Jeremiah, when the exile occurred. In that struggle children were lost. Many tears were shed by mothers over their children.

But now that prophecy of Jeremiah is *fulfilled* (verse 17), which means that now this word reaches its fullness, for here the *real* struggle becomes apparent. It always was, and certainly is now, the battle against *the* seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ! The devil seeks to destroy the Son of David, and in doing so he will not spare any of "Rachel's children." Herod seeks out his arch-enemy, and he will not show any mercy. The woes and pains of the Old Testament church were many, but it will not be any easier in the New Testament dispensation, for now we have entered the last phase of the great struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent! There lies the deepest cause of the lamentation. The church has entered into the last era, and with it also the last woe, "the great tribulation"

(Revelation 7:14), has begun. The serpent who could not destroy the Child goes to make war on the woman and her children (see also Revelation 12), and the cry will rise up to heaven, “How long, Lord, until thou wilt avenge the blood of thy children?” (See Revelation 9).

THE FIRST CASUALTIES

It is remarkable that this story, which comes immediately after the Christmas account, puts us right on the battlefield of the latter days, in the midst of great lamentation. Where only a while before angels sang of “peace on earth,” mothers now wail because of the war that rages and the casualties of battle, “O my children, my children.” Here we learn that the battle against the Christ involves us and our children, our families.

The bloodshed began in Bethlehem. The first “casualties” fell there. I do not call these babes “the first martyrs,” for they did not even know why they were being killed. They are, however, the first casualties in the New Testament era, in the intensified conflict which has come with the birth of Christ. For now – more than ever – the rage of the devil is fierce against the people of the covenant. Rachel, Rachel, if you mourned already under the Old Covenant, now is the real time for your tears, for now begins the great tribulation!

Do we understand the character of this dispensation? The way the world celebrates Christmas can really put you on the wrong track. The way they celebrate it out there, it seems as if the birth of Christ means the end of all woes, whereas it really means the beginning of the woes! Peace on earth will come only in the way of extreme sacrifice, through blood, sweat, and tears, and while it is indeed fully the blood and the sacrifice of Christ alone which will bring redemption, *we are involved*. There will be casualties among us, even “innocent babes,” so to speak, will be victimized. For the devil knows of no mercy and his anger is great, and he goes about seeking to devour Rachel’s children.

Many tears will be shed between the first and the second coming of Christ. There will be much suffering, also for the church and its youth. It will touch us and our families, our homes and our lives, in many different ways. And it is ultimately not designed against us, but against the Christ, Who is here exiled to Egypt and today is denounced by millions! Our Lord warned us about this situation before His cross, when He said, “If they do this to the Master, what will they do to the disciples?”

This history shows us that we may not become complacent after Christmas, as if there were no battle going on. We are called to be aware of our involvement in the great battle which has intensified since the birth of Christ. We are warned to preserve our Christian lifestyle and to set our Christian priorities in a world that does not understand, and we must do so no matter what the personal cost. For only if we are involved, will be consoled in this struggle.

CONSOLATION REFUSED

What is striking in this passage (and in the one of Jeremiah 31) is the statement that Rachel “refused to be consoled.” She refused consolation because “they [the children] were no more.”

Refusal to be consoled. Some explainers see this as a *sinful* reaction of Rachel to her woes. When consolation is offered, they say, it should be accepted, but it is typically the reaction of a sinful, proud woman to refuse consolation. However, we should be careful here.

It does not say anywhere that Rachel’s refusal to accept consolation is condemnable. As a matter of fact, it is quite understandable. “They were no more. . .” means simply: whatever you say, it does not bring the children back. The loss is definite and devastating, and words cannot change the reality or take away the pain. The only thing that would bring consolation is the return of the children. That’s all Rachel thinks of, and that’s all she wants!

You can understand this better if you yourself have had to give up a loved one. People come to you from all sides with well-meant words of comfort, but at certain moments it all means so little, for whatever is said, it doesn’t change the situation. All you really want is your loved one back. And it is understandable that some withdraw into themselves in their grief and “refuse to be consoled.” They do not want to see anybody, not talk to anyone, not hear any words of comfort, for they are governed by their grief.

NO CHEAP WORDS

I think here of the situation of Psalm 77, “By a weight of troubles bowed, to my God my grief I told, *I refuse to be consoled.*” The spirit grows restless and is deeply moved and you begin to wonder: “Where is God, who once us blessed?” Why, LORD, did you let them take my children? I cannot live without my children. This is called “being overwhelmed by grief.”

Sometimes words, indeed, fail. There are many situations when you discover as pastor: it is so easy to say something, but it is so hard really to comfort someone. This is especially so under truly devastating conditions as in Bethlehem. Is not often small comfort given and are not often cheap words spoken?

This leads us to the question: where will the church in the latter days find its consolation? When the woes increase and the great tribulation begins, where will we go for comfort? What word of comfort will you speak to those wives who have lost their husbands, and those mothers who have lost their children for Christ’s sake and for the sake of the Gospel? What will you say to those whose whole earthly lives have been devastated by the enemy just because they are Christians?

There is in this respect, even though we know little of it in our time and country, untold suffering! Believers are being ridiculed, boycotted, persecuted and even killed for the sake of Christ – the earth is red with the blood of the saints. So many have been led like sheep to the slaughter and it continues today, O God!

THE RETURN OF THE CHILDREN

Human words fail. That is why Luke here refers us to the Word of God, the prophecy already given of old, the Word which never fails! Perhaps you noticed that Matthew only gives a part of the prophecy, the part that deals with the exile of the children. But if we read on in Jeremiah 31, we also read of the *return* of the children: “Thus says the LORD, Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears. . . there is hope for your future, says the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country. . .” (Jeremiah 31: 16, 17).

Jeremiah consoles Israel! And the content of this consolation is that Israel will be restored out of exile to its own land to await the kingdom of God and the coming of the Messiah. That prophecy was fulfilled. The Messiah has come. Now it must be clear also for the church of the latter days where consolation is to be sought. It is to be sought in the sure fulfillment of the Word of God, and in the return of the Son of God, especially now that He has undergone the shame of the cross and been exalted above all kings and broken the power of the devil.

We have the prophetic word made all the more sure today. The content of the consolation today is that Christ has overcome the power of the devil and is now ruling in heaven, putting all his enemies as a footstool beneath His feet. Our comfort is that we, in life and death, in body and soul, belong to this Lord and Saviour, and that nothing can separate us from His love. Our sure hope is that He, when He comes, will *bring back* with Him all the children, and that not one child will be lost. Our great consolation is that all God’s children – also those who have gone before us and especially those who have given their life for the sake of Christ – will see the great day of His glory with all the saints.

Christ will gather His entire church. The turmoil of the latter days will be great. The wounds will go deep, for when God cuts, He cuts deep. We will be sorely tested and refined, by trial, through temptation, and it will always be a matter of “sowing seed in tears” (Psalm 129). The church of Christ will go through the great tribulation. But there will also always be peace in the turmoil, balm for the wounds, strength in trials, hope in temptation, and the harvest will be realized. “The sower, bearing grain in sadness, shall certainly come home with gladness.”

There is a great lamentation in Bethlehem. For Christ’s sake. It is only the beginning of the woes. But there is for the church of the latter days a great consolation in the fulfillment of the Word of God. We are directed to that consolation, which will be our strength all the more now that Christ has been exalted.

GONE IS THE GRIEF

We who must go through the great tribulation may await the certain perfection of the church. This comforts us when difficulties come because we serve Christ. It will not be said of us anymore that we refuse to be consoled, for we are consoled in all trial and strife of life. We are consoled both when the Lord grants times of relief and when there are times of great stress.

Where have all the children gone? All the children will come back. “A seed shall serve Him, and each generation in time to come will hear of His salvation; the unborn too, will hear the proclamation of what He wrought” (Psalm 22:11, *Book of Praise*).

It will not always be easy for the church in the latter days. The devil’s attacks and the world’s temptations will be with us. Our own weak flesh will be against us, not to mention the moments of deep sorrow and grief, when God really cuts deep. But we have been directed where to seek our consolation, and we may sing already now, though sometimes with tears, “Gone is the grief that silenced me.”

Gone is the grief. For the loss of the children. For all the pain. For Christ’s sake, whose pain was incomparable, who bore the penalty and paid the price. In Christ, by faith, the grief is gone. And one day it will be gone forever. “I may, delivered from despair, now laud thy Name in song and prayer. Forever, LORD, my God and Saviour, will I give thanks for Thy great favour” (Psalm 30:7, *Book of Praise*).

Gone is the grief. You and I, Rachel, and the children, we shall rejoice forever.