

The empire strikes back

I wonder if some of you are fans of the Star Wars films that have been produced for about the past forty years. I gather a new one has just come out called *The Rise of Skywalker* and I think this is supposed to be the last one, but the series has got very complicated with all kinds of sequels and prequels. I was a fan of the original trilogy and I've always been struck by what seems to me to be its quite overt Christian imagery. So the first film was called *Star Wars* and this was basically a story of conflict between good and evil, with good winning a decisive victory. Then, however, came the second film: *The Empire Strikes Back*, a story of retaliation and fight back by evil. And that was then followed by a third and final film of final victory and triumph, *The Return of the Jedi*. Well, you figure it out: good making a decisive move against evil; evil striking back, and the eventual return of the victor. It's the Christian story in a nutshell.

So when I was thinking about our passage this morning from Matthew's Gospel the phrase that came to mind was, 'The Empire Strikes Back.' After all, we have just been celebrating the Christmas story in all its joy: we love the angels and the shepherds and the baby Jesus in the manger and it's all very gezellige and feel-good. We believe that in the birth of this baby God is taking a great initiative: he is coming to save the world that he loves but which is captive to sin and evil. You see, in Jesus' day his land and indeed much of the known world was in the grip of an empire: the Roman Empire, and there were frequent uprisings against it. But the sway of Rome over its empire affords us a glimpse into the deeper condition of the world as a whole: it is in the grip of a deeper Empire, underlying Rome, an Empire of evil that rules and that provokes conflict and injustice and inhumanity and that sucks the life out of the world. And the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem signals an uprising against this Empire. This Empire is being invaded by God, who has established a foothold in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem.

This empire, however, has its representative, its agent, who rules Jesus' land under the name of Rome. His name is Herod and he has now been alerted, foolishly, by so-called wise men, that this invasion has taken place. 'A new king has been born!' proclaim the wise men naively and so the empire is aroused. And what happens next? Well the empire strikes back! In a vain attempt to snuff out this uprising, to eliminate the invader and to rid the world of Jesus Herod orders all the children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem to be murdered.

So, God makes a move... and the empire strikes back. And that is the story that runs like a thread throughout the Bible. Go back to the Old Testament and read the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis as it portrays a world that is descending ever deeper into violence and conflict and chaos. And at the end of the section of Genesis God takes an initiative to bring salvation. He calls a man named Abram and tells him that he will make his descendants a blessing to the world. Abram represents God's mission to save the world. But read on and what do you find? Well, the Empire strikes back. Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, find themselves living in the land of Egypt. And they are thriving and prospering – but then there arises a new King, Pharaoh, and he resolves to eradicate God's people. And what does he do? Well, what he does is to order all the male children who are born to God's people to be murdered! And does that ring any bells? Well, yes, of course – Matthew knows this story well and in his account of Herod murdering the children he recognises that Herod is Pharaoh revisited, Pharaoh all over again. The empire struck back against God all those centuries ago in Egypt – and it was only the bravery of a bunch of midwives who were prepared to resist that averted Pharaoh's genocide. And now the empire strikes back again in Bethlehem and its surroundings, and Joseph must take his family and flee in order to thwart Herod.

This is the story the Bible tells. God's initiatives will always be resisted. In fact the Empire is committed to eradicating every trace of God and Jesus from the world. And so it was that centuries after Pharaoh and Egypt God's people Israel faced another mighty empire, this time Babylon. And Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and its temple which was believed to be the very dwelling place of God and so Babylon thought it was banishing Israel's God from the earth. And

God's people Israel were taken away into exile and that seemed to be the end of God, the end of God's people, the end of God's plans and purposes. And it is from that period that there comes this sorrowful lament that Matthew quotes:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentations,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because
they are no more.’

Matthew quotes Jeremiah, for as in Babylon, so now in Bethlehem: the Empire strikes back and mothers lament their children.

And, of course, it's the same story throughout Jesus' ministry. He faces the opposition of the religious establishment who turn out to be on the side of the Empire and they harass and conspire against him - until finally they take him and put him on trial and hand him over to Rome. And as Jesus' bloodied corpse is lain in a tomb the empire must have felt that it had finally eliminated him. Its strike back against God had finally ridded the world of Jesus. He had been banished once and for all – or so they thought.

Well, of course, in each of these cases the Empire does not succeed, for God keeps coming back, returning. When long ago in Egypt Pharaoh attempted to destroy the Israelites and thwart God's plan what happened next? God led them out of Egypt – liberated and saved them. And when later the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon, what happened next? Well, God led them out of Babylon and returned them to their land. So after telling of Rachel weeping for her children our passage from Jeremiah concludes:

‘there is hope for your future...
your children shall come back
to their own country.’

They shall return! And when Herod tried to murder Jesus, Joseph protected Jesus and took him away to Egypt and when the threat was passed and Herod was dead Joseph brought Jesus home. They returned – coming out of Egypt just as the Israelites had done all those centuries before. And of course, later on, when Jesus is done away with and laid dead in a tomb – well, you know what happens next. You see, it's just like the films. The Empire is challenged and then the Empire strikes back, but there follows the return. It's the story of the exodus; it's the story of the exile; it's the story of Jesus' birth; it's the story of Jesus' death – and it's the story that goes on reverberating throughout history as the Empire tries to rid the world of Jesus.

Indeed the whole of human history since the coming of Christ could be seen as an attempt to rid the world of Jesus. At times, especially in the early years of the church, this has been through fierce persecution. Violence and fury were turned against Christians by Roman emperors in an attempt to stamp out Christ and his Church. But at other times in history the Empire's strike back has taken more subtle forms. Tragically, it has often been the church itself that has seemed to determined to rid the world of Jesus by misrepresenting him, by identifying him with power and pomp, and with violence and with empire and the subjugation of people. Or the church has made Jesus unrecognisable by being deathly and judgemental and joyless. But always there have been times of return – as for example in the sixteenth century in what we call the Reformation, when Christ had been almost eclipsed by the Church and when he and his gospel were rediscovered.

But what of today? Well, of course in parts of the world the Empire strives to rid the world of Jesus by blatant opposition and persecution. That goes on as ever, and we have people here in this congregation who cannot return to their lands because of the danger they would face on account of their Christian faith. But in this part of the world Jesus is banished more subtly – by rampant secularism, by a so-called Enlightenment mindset which is so narrow and thin that it allows no place for the sovereign, transcendent God and his Christ. So Jesus is gently eased out to the delight of those whose world is too confined to ever accommodate him. And many rejoice at this, and the world may indeed be a better place without some distortions of the Christian faith. But ridding the world of Jesus may not be all that it is cracked up to be. There are things that will be missed. Life

will be impoverished. And we might worry that the attempted elimination of Jesus from the world by Herod was accompanied by the massacre of children, for it can be argued that when the Christian God is eclipsed it is the vulnerable and the powerless who may suffer most. One commentator has written, ‘Those who begin by hating the Child (i.e. Jesus) will end up by hurting children... If people will be ungodly they will be inhumane. Herod is the gospel’s earliest evidence of this fact.’

We, however, believe in return. The Empire may strike back against God. The Empire strikes back in Egypt, in Babylon, in Bethlehem, on Calvary but always God returns, as we believe that Christ will do at the end of time. Meanwhile, however, he returns through us, through you and me, through the Church. In a Herod world determined to do away with Jesus he returns in lives that are open to him, lives that are ready for discipleship. He returns in us as we bear witness to him in our lives and in our worship and in the way we live. Or to put it another way you could say, reading Matthew’s story, that you and I are Joseph. You and I are Joseph, safeguarding Christ in a world which would cast him out. We are Joseph: at odds with the Empire and keeping alive and safe the Gospel entrusted to us. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
 God of Christmas, God of Bethlehem,
 God of shepherd and angels
 and good news of a Saviour born,
 we bless and praise your name.
 We rejoice that you have come in Jesus
 to fulfil your promises for the world you love;
 we celebrate your faithfulness
 that will not let us go or abandon us.
 Yet we recognise that your coming
 unleashed a reaction;
 we acknowledge that the birth of the Christ child
 stirred evil up and violence,
 that your love was met with ferocious resistance,
 that the sound of the angels song near Bethlehem
 was replaced by the sound of mothers weeping
 for their children.
 O God forgive us for all the ways we resist you.
 Forgive us for the darkness in us
 that opposes the light.
 Forgive us that we are part of a world
 where tyrants displace the vulnerable
 and threaten the powerless.
 We confess to you our sins and the sins of the world,
 thanking you for the gift of forgiveness
 and praying for grace to change and to make
 the world a place where Christ is welcomed.
 We pray in his name and we join together
 in the words that he taught us, saying...