

Donnybrook

28 December 2021

Welcome

In a church in Florence, there is a remarkable painting of the Nativity by a flourishing painter of the late 1400s, Domenico Ghirlandaio. In some ways it is unremarkable – all the scenes are “in”, the baby, the shepherd, the magi, the ox and the ass. An unusual feature is a large stone coffin standing in the middle of the scene. Out of this classical sarcophagus, the ox and the ass are munching. It is an empty tomb.

Topic

It is a useful visual reminder that even the birth stories are told in the light of Easter faith. In the infancy gospels, the we have significant traces of the events of salvation.

Steps

This helps us to understand the place of such a brutal story in Matthew 1-2. Matthew’s purpose is threefold.

Firstly, he knows that Jesus will eventually be put to death and the slaughter of the innocents is an anticipatory reminder. What the film makers call a prequel. He writes in the light of the resurrection but also under the shadow of the cross.

Secondly, Matthew portrays Jesus throughout his Gospel as a Moses figure. For example, in that Gospel Jesus gives five great discourse, five being the number of books in the Pentateuch attributed to Moses. This Moses portrait is very present in Matthew 1-2. Our story today echos the story of the birth of Moses and how Pharaoh want to do away with all Hebrew boy infants in Exodus 1-2.

Finally, the quotation about Rachel weeping for her children, in the tragic expression “because they are no more,” comes from the pen of Jeremiah and the time of the great exile in Babylon. This was an inestimable tragedy, which threatened the obliteration of people of Israel. Once more, the shadow side, really the dark side, of human experience is underscored.

Conclusion

Probably none of us got a Christmas card with the murder of the innocents on it. It would challenge the cosy cheeriness of the season somewhat! Matthew wants to remind us of the tragedy of the human condition. It is not all joy and light. He also wants to remind us that the birth of Jesus is God’s offer of grace, God’s response to the human condition. He is our Emmanuel, God with us, as the song puts it “through it all.”