Micah 5:1-5a

I think we are all, for the most part, familiar with the Christmas story. The Old Testament text for today is directly related to it because it contains the prophecy regarding the birth place of the messiah. When you look at the various Christmas cards, you probably won’t see one where the artist has a sign in the picture beside the stable that says “welcome to Bethlehem” because everyone knows that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But what do we really expect to find in Bethlehem? Do we really know where to find the king today?

The wise men from the east had the star to guide them, but for some reason they ended up where king Herod was, who was in Jerusalem. This is understandable because all the kings of Judah were in Jerusalem, the capital city. So naturally, the wise men knowing that a king is born to the Jews, he would most likely be in Jerusalem. But he was not. I sometimes wonder why these wise men didn’t just follow the star straight to Bethlehem, but the text according to Matthew 2 isn’t clear whether they followed the star from the east all the way to Jerusalem or if the star only started guiding them from Jerusalem (though the latter seems to be the case).

King Herod, also known as Herod the great, he himself knew nothing about the messiah. All he cared about was to secure power in his own hands and so when he heard of a “new” king of the Jews, Matthew described him as being troubled and all Jerusalem with him. At first he seemed to care a lot about the new born king, so he inquired all his scribes and chief priests for the whereabouts of this new born king, but we later find out that he did this so he could locate him and kill him.

The scribes and the chief priests on the other hand knew exactly where the messiah would be born. And here too I have always wondered, if they are so familiar with the scriptures and even quoting Micah here, why didn’t they do anything, why didn’t they also go worship him? They had been doing their homework, no doubt about that, but their hearts were no different from Herod’s for they did not believe, even if they have no intention of killing him, at least for the time being. Perhaps they were more concerned with this earthly king in front of them that they had no time for another. Or perhaps Bethlehem was simply too insignificant for them big city people to go to.

What do we find in Bethlehem? That is really the question for us. What are we expecting there and more specifically, what are we expecting in that baby boy Jesus? For Herod, Jesus was his rival that needed to be killed, even at the expense of all the little children in Bethlehem. It didn’t matter who it was, so long as he could maintain his position and status, so long as he is the “great”. And those religious leaders too, they knew, they had the knowledge, but their hearts were empty. The messiah that was promised since the time of Adam is now here, but they remained where they were, unmoved, uncaring, unconcerned.

Do we not also have moments like these, do we not also act like these wicked and unbelieving men? When sin is at our doorsteps, knocking our doors to get in, we also find Jesus there keeping the door shut for us. But what do we do? We kill Jesus because he is in the way. It doesn’t have to be like Herod who tried to maintain his power because sin takes on many forms for each of us. For some of us, it could be murder in the form of hatred and anger toward a neighbor, or it could be adultery when we have that special relationship with someone other than our own spouses, and even when we have lustful thoughts, we have already committed adultery. Or it could it be greed and covetousness, when we desire something that does not belong to us and we get upset over it. I could go on for another 30 minutes describing all these various sins but YOU, you yourselves know best how you have killed Jesus with your sins.

And the perhaps the worst part is that like the scribes and chief priests, we know the word, we know the law which condemns and we also know the good news of Jesus, but we are indifferent about it. We know that Jesus has come and will come again to judge the living and the dead, but we are still secure and at ease with our sins. We remain where we are, we are stuck, because ultimately we are locked up in this prison called sin and the key for this gate is in Satan’s hands. As a sinner, we are bound to and bound by Satan to finally die and suffer hell with him. We are indeed poor, miserable sinners, because we are so helpless with our condition.

Surely we can do something, right? The answer is no. We will always be like Herod and those religious leaders. Even so, even when Herod, the scribes, chief priest, Pharisees, Pilate, Judas, and even when each one of us are still minding our business, only caring about ourselves, being stuck in the prison of sin, he came. He came to Bethlehem, a place so insignificant that one would not expect to find him there. Indeed, he is not there, he is not stuck and unmoved because he is not like us, he is not passively being locked and chained by sin or his own weak flesh or the devil. That’s why he comes, he did not stay and remain in Bethlehem but he came to Jerusalem, not to take the throne away from Herod, nor to take away the religious establishment as the Pharisees accused him of, but he came to Jerusalem to sit on a wooden throne, we call it the cross on Golgotha. He came to take away the sins of the world, to take away the chains and punishment that we all deserved and he bore them all on himself.

If you think Bethlehem was insignificant, then dying on a cross would be the lowest of the low. One can’t get any worse than that, but the climax of it all is the fact that he was forsaken by his own heavenly father. Can anyone ever say that God has forsaken him? Jesus himself says that God takes care of the good and the bad equally, and is more concerned with us all than all the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, yet his own son he has forsaken (Mt6).

But he is no longer there either. He is not at the cross nor is he in the tomb because death no longer has dominion over him (Rm6:9). Sin, death, hell, Satan, and all the evil of this world cannot contain him, nothing can bind him and keep him there. Therefore you will not find him in Bethlehem, although he was born there. You will not find him at the cross and the tomb in Jerusalem, although that was the destination of his earthly mission. You will not find him in those places because Jesus is here today. And if a king being born in a small and insignificant town, and if a great prophet offering his own body as the greatest offering should baffle the world, then he being in this little piece of bread would be totally unthinkable.

You may probably have read the little caption in today’s bulletin. The name Bethlehem in Hebrew means “house of bread” and interestingly enough in Arabic it means “house of meat/flesh”. How fitting is this name for the birthplace of the Bread of Life. He himself has said in John 6 that he is “the bread of life” (v35) and “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v51) and “for my flesh is true food” (v55). And finally on the night when he offered himself up, he prepares a banquet before his disciples and with the bread he says, “this is my body, which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.”

He comes to us to give us life for we were dead in our trespasses (Eph2). What comfort this brings to us all that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rm5:8) and offers this forgiveness of sins and assurance of that forgiveness continually through his own flesh in, with, and under the bread.

What do we expect to find in Bethlehem and the baby Jesus? we find bread in the house of bread. Not an enemy as Herod thought or just another crazy prophet as the religious leaders thought, but he is our God, who came, who continues to come today, and indeed will come again to give us life and freedom from the chains of sin.