

Gospel text

Matthew 2: 13-15.19-23

13 While the eastern astrologers had left, Joseph had a dream in which he heard this message from God: "When you are awake, take the child and his mother with you and flee to Egypt, for Herod is about to search for the child to have him killed. 14 When he woke up, he took the child and his mother with him and left for Egypt at night. 15 He stayed there until Herod died. Thus one came to the complete understanding of the word of the Lord through the prophet who said: "From Egypt I called my son."

19 When Herod died, Joseph had a dream in Egypt where he heard this message from God: 20 "When you are awake, take the child and his mother with you and set off for the land of Israel, for those who sought the life of the child died. 21 After waking up, he took the child and his mother with him and returned to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus ruled in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go to that region. After a warning received in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee. 23 There he settled in a city called Nazareth, and so one came to the complete understanding of the word of the prophet who said that he would be called Nazorean.

Gospel commentary - Homily

Remember: your father was an immigrant

Four hundred and fifty Tamil migrants on a boat at sea for three months finally landed recently on the west coast of Canada. This is another episode in a story that has been going on for millennia. How many people displaced by armed conflict or natural disasters can we count since the beginnings of humanity? Only since the last world war, one can draw up a long list: 40 million people displaced in Europe in the aftermath of this conflict, Palestinians fleeing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and finding themselves for years in refugee camps, the exodus from mass of Vietnamese following the Vietnam War and which is at the source of these "boat people", two million people who take refuge in neighboring countries, in particular Zaire, following the Rwandan genocide. It is as if being displaced, taking refuge somewhere to continue living is fundamentally part of our collective history.

It is this aspect of our history which is evoked in the evangelical account proposed by the liturgy of this Sunday. Joseph and his family had to go into exile in Egypt to escape the fury of King Herod the Great, and wait for his death before returning to the land of Israel. And even then, the fear of his son, Herod Archelaus, who reigned over Judea where Bethlehem is located, would bring them to the north of the country, in Galilee, in the small village of Nazareth. This story told by Matthew is part of what we call the infancy narratives that only Matthew and Luke offer us. And there is a certain consensus among modern biblical scholars to give little or no historical value to these stories. We could even add that today's story is incoherent, since Joseph should also have been afraid of going to Nazareth in Galilee, because another son of Herod, Herod Antipas, the same one who will behead John the Baptist, ruled there. But it is not the work of a historian that Matthew wants to do, but the work of a theologian and catechist. Let's take a closer look.

Why this stay in Egypt? If we relate to the history of the Jewish people as we know it from the Old Testament, we know that a big part of them, since Joseph, son of Jacob, stayed several generations in Egypt like slave, and it is under the direction of Moses that they found freedom, while living this long and difficult exodus in the desert where they received from God the ten commandments, before entering the promised land, the land of Israel, as summed up in Deuteronomy: "You shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous." (Dt 26,5) Now the purpose of the accounts of childhood is to announce in advance who Jesus is and what awaits him as an adult. The catechesis of Matthew therefore says this: Jesus is in solidarity with his people by sharing this exodus, knowing wandering and roaming, and he will have to undergo the wrath of the authorities who will want to kill him; all this prepares the beginning of his ministry where we will see that he is the new Moses who will give a new Law on the mountain (The Sermon on the Mount), and will bring a new people into a new Kingdom.

What to do with such a catechesis? To speak of Jesus is also to speak of us. Are we not his disciples, are we not like the master. How does Jesus react to people who are isolated by society, such as the sick or tax collectors, or even to strangers like the Samaritan or the Syro-Phoenician? His heart opens, he enters into dialogue, he loves, he gives. We usually have such a behavior only we have experienced ourselves to have been marginalized, to have been a foreigner, to have lived a form of homelessness where we needed the sympathy and compassion of other. This is, moreover, what Leviticus says: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God". (Lv 19, 34) If we have not ourselves experienced being a foreigner or being forced to emigrate, then it is only by opening our hearts to those who live this experience, by listening to their experiences, that we can develop the same behavior as our master. And at that moment, through these strangers, we will see Joseph, Jesus and Mary on the road to Egypt.

Displaced people who have to take refuge elsewhere will probably forever be part of our collective history and we have little control over these events. However, we can open our hearts and our intelligence to their fate, as Jesus did, and even share our home with them to create the extended family, the family of the children of God, the holy family. Is this our desire?