Trinity College Cambridge
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FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT
The Flight to Egypt
Merson's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*

Hosea 11: 1–9 Matthew 2: 13–15, 19–20

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Tonight, we are considering this story of the escape of the holy family into Egypt and their return after the death of Herod. To help with this, I have chosen Luc Olivier Merson's extraordinary painting from 1879, entitled *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. I confess that I am not much of an art critic, so I cannot really make any comments on Merson's original theological intentions – but will reflect only on what the painting means to me and how I see it at this current time in my own life and ministry.

As well as this being one of my favourite works of pictorial art, I am deeply attracted to this Biblical story too because it is such an important part of the Gospel narrative. You will be aware that only Matthew tells us this story of the flight into Egypt – and it is far from a side issue for Matthew: it is a core element to his interpretation of the life of Jesus.

Of course, Matthew and Luke are the only two Gospel writers who give us the Nativity story. And given the vastly different approaches that they take, it is clear that their concern is not so much with historical accuracy as to paint a theological picture of Jesus Christ, Messiah, prophet, priest and king. They rely on metaphor and cultural references in order to present the truth of Jesus to us and it is this theological portrait that provides us with the depth of the Christmas narrative, rather than any attempt to produce a timeline of facts surrounding the birth of Jesus.

And Matthew's story of the flight into Egypt and subsequent return is a crucial part of the nativity drama because it sets the scene for everything else that Matthew will want to tell us as the rest of his Gospel unfolds. At the heart of Matthew's Gospel presentation of Jesus is one core truth: that Jesus Christ is the new Moses, the ultimate Moses if you like, who has come to set his people free and take us into the Promised Land, which is the Kingdom of God. This is neither the time nor the occasion to explore that idea in any real depth. But it is certainly true that Matthew structures his Gospel narrative around this idea and presents Jesus in comparison to Moses as a key component of his account.

But with regard to this aspect of the life of Jesus according to Matthew, let's just recap where we are up to...

King Herod has flown into a rage because he has been tricked by the wise men and he now decides to have all the new-born males in Bethlehem killed in an attempt to destroy the new king of Israel who has been prophesied. It seems an odd decree to make, really. Bethlehem was such a tiny village. It wouldn't have taken his military very long to find out which baby had been visited by wise men. But instead, he decrees to kill all the males under two years old.

The idea of Herod doing this atrocious act fits in with what we know about him. He was renowned for putting dozens and dozens of people to death during his reign. He had executed members of the aristocracy, members of the Jewish court. He had his wife executed, his mother-in-law, and her brother. He had executed his wife's grandfather, and his brother-in-law. He had three of his own sons executed. When Herod was in a bad mood, it seems no-one was safe! So a slaughtering of the innocents in Bethlehem is entirely plausible as far as his character is concerned.

But because it is Matthew telling the story – and because he has a theological agenda – we need to think about it from another angle. Remember in the story of the life of Moses. The Pharaoh wanted to execute all the Israelite boys. We read in Exodus 1: 15: 'The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives..."When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live".' But, as we read in Exodus 1: 17, 'The midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.' And subsequently, of course, Moses was hidden in the bulrushes and was found and entered the court of the Pharaoh. The rest of the story, we know all too well.

It seems to me that, in the account of the slaughter of the innocents, Matthew is drawing a clear parallel between Moses and Jesus in order to set up his theological narrative for the rest of the Gospel.

And, as we come to tonight's story, the flight to Egypt and return, Matthew is consolidating for us this theological truth about the Messiah that he wants us to reflect on.

Joseph had a dream in which he is visited by an angel, who says: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you." And so they went to Egypt to live there as refugees for the rest of Herod's reign. And, of course, Matthew is then able to use Hosea 11: 1 – which we heard in our first reading – as another prophecy for the Messiah, which states, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son'. But the truth is that Matthew often played fast and loose with his use of Old Testament texts and he didn't always translate them accurately but created his own translations to make a theological point. The same is true here...He translates Hosea 11: 1 as, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son'. But when that text was originally given, and in the subsequent hundreds of years following, it was never taken to refer to an individual person but was a reference to the people of Israel as a community and the Greek translation of the Old Testament actually reads: 'Out of Egypt, I have called them *sons*' – in the plural. But Matthew changes its meaning and attributes it to a single person: Jesus. And, unlike Luke, Mark and John,

he records this narrative of Jesus fleeing to Egypt so that Jesus can come out again in fulfilment of the prophecy and be aligned even more clearly with Moses, the Great Liberator of the people of God: the one sent by God to bring liberation to his people to set us free from bondage and bring us to spiritual freedom.

So if that is Matthew's understanding of Jesus, it is understandable that he wants to locate Jesus in Egypt and that he wants him to come out of Egypt to resonate with the story of how Moses led his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. And it is likewise understandable that he would want to have a parallel story of how the baby Jesus was saved from a slaughter of the innocents in similar fashion to how Moses was saved from a slaughter of the innocents. Moses, in Jewish tradition, was the Deliverer of the people and also the great Lawgiver on Mount Sinai. Jesus, in Christian tradition, is the Deliverer of the people and also the great Lawgiver on the Sermon of the Mount – recorded, of course, by Matthew. The parallels are obvious.

And then Matthew concludes his nativity story with the family coming back from Egypt and their decision to move to Nazareth. We don't know exactly how long the family were in Egypt, but it couldn't have been very long because they decided to come back when they heard that Herod had died and the historians tell us that he died in 4 BC and Jesus was born probably in 4 BC or 5 BC. And with that return from Egypt to a settled life in Nazareth, Matthew concludes his account of the nativity story for us

The next we hear from Matthew of Jesus, the new Moses, is some three decades later as he comes to be baptised by John in the Jordan and begin his public ministry. 30 years or so between the return from Egypt and the beginning of his public ministry: a time in which Jesus must have spent many hours – even years – pondering the mission to which he had been called by God. Alongside the comfort of knowing that he was fulfilling the will of God would undoubtedly have been a sense of loneliness, even isolation, knowing that no-one else on earth could possibly come close to understanding the implications of what he would have to endure for the salvation of the world. Loneliness, isolation – even at times, desolation...

I am often drawn to this painting by Merson; *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. It is one of those pieces of art that speaks to me in a different way every time I contemplate it. I am struck by the emptiness of the landscape, the position of the holy family, isolated from the rest of humanity in their calling, isolated even from one another as they contemplate all that has happened to them over recent days and months. Mary is exhausted by events. Joseph sleeps out of utter fatigue. The donkey appears shattered too: head held low, hind leg bent, perhaps hobbling through the pain of the arduous journey. Even the smoke from the fire seems to be struggling to rise upwards... It is a haunting and desolate scene, straining with emotion and fatigue.

Whilst the figures are 'together' on their corporate journey, there is a distance between them; they are together – yet each is alone in his and her sense of tiredness, fatigue and fear. One can only imagine what must have been going through the minds of Mary and Joseph as they rested on their way. One can only imagine the fears and anxieties that must have

filled their hearts as they rested up, miles from home, separated from their loved ones, alienated from the security of their home by the course of life-events that had overtaken them. What were they thinking as, in this painting, they drift towards exhausted sleep and a night of rest that would no doubt have been uncomfortable and often interrupted? What would be awaiting them in Egypt? Would they make friends there? Would they be able to find work and suitable accommodation? Would they ever be able to go back home?

What we have here, strongly depicted by Merson is a homeless Messiah. God as a refugee. God as an immigrant. God as a stranger in a strange land. God in exile.

I think it is good for us to be reminded that Jesus Christ knew the bitterness of homelessness. Twice in the last week, I have encountered that bitterness for others.

Friday week ago, a man knocked on the Vicarage door. He was very polite, gently spoken, from the Czech Republic. He had just come out of prison and was on the streets. It was a freezing day and he was absolutely shaking with the bitter cold in his bones. I brought him in and fed him and I have not seen anyone eat a meal so quickly. I phoned five homeless shelters to try to get him a place but each one was full up and they could only put him on a waiting list. In the end, I phoned a Crisis Line and they said that he would have to sleep outside for three nights in the same place and they would send out a team of people to find him and then, after three days, would refer him to a shelter. So I had to send him off into the freezing night to sleep at the train station with the hope that, over the next three days, he would be found by the team and eventually given somewhere to stay. But my heart was so heavy for him and I felt so awful not being able to provide shelter for him immediately.

Then, on Wednesday this week, I was at Euston station and sat chatting for half an hour with two homeless men who had been on the streets for eight years. I can't even imagine what that must be like. Again, they were shaking with the bitter cold biting into their bones. They were telling me about how hard it is to find a shelter: the waiting lists are growing by the month. I told them about the man I had met the previous week and how he had to spend three nights in the same place to be picked up by the team and they responded by telling me how hard that is because they get moved on after one or two nights, so are rarely in the same place to meet up with a Crisis Team.

It seems an utterly hopeless situation for so many – and it seems to me that homelessness is a bitter, bitter evil in society today.

But Jesus himself knows the pain of homelessness. He knows what it is to be 'between places': to be an immigrant, a stranger in a strange place – because that was one of his earliest earthly experiences and, metaphorically, continued to be his experience all the days of his earthly life. Jesus knows the pain of homelessness – and sits with them in the bitter cold. As a Church, we are to carry on the ministry of Christ in the world today. And just as he identifies with the poor and the homeless, the vulnerable, the refugee, so we are to reach out to the stranger in our midst and do what we can to meet their need through the Gospel, through acts of kindness and compassion.

But how are we to do that? Specifically tonight, what can we learn from this extraordinary painting by Merson that will speak to us of the calling we have as a church to go out in mission and ministry to the most vulnerable in our society?

As I said at the beginning, I don't know the original theological intentions of the painter – but I can only say what I see. And what I see is the Sphinx. And, for me, the Sphinx represents the ministry of the Church to the most vulnerable in society. There are just three things I want to say in this regard.

The Sphinx cradles the Christ-child

In a painting that so overwhelmingly speaks of fatigue, exhaustion and uncertainty, the Sphinx sits strong and confident. There is a strength in the Sphinx that is indestructible: you notice that there had been a sandstorm recently and the sands lap at the Plinth, but no damage had been done to the monument. And the pride of the Sphinx is not, perhaps, in itself, but in the fact that it cradles the Christ-child. The Sphinx seems to be almost offering the Christ-child to the world here as a source of hope and certainty amidst all the uncertainty and darkness.

And, as if to emphasise the hope that Jesus is to the marginalised, Merson portrays him in this painting as the only source of light. As we leave behind this season of Candlemas, we are rightly reminded that Jesus is the Light of the World.

There is a sense in which the Church cradles the Christ-child; that we are holding Christ in the midst of the wasteland and scene of desolation that is the experience of so many in our society today. As those around us struggle with exhaustion and fatigue and are lost in their fears for the future, anxieties about what is to come and are seeking rest on the journey of life... we, the Church, hold Christ out to them, the Light of the World.

We who have so little to offer can, at the very least, offer Christ to those who are feeling lost and in pain. I am not one of those who will glibly say that, "Jesus is the answer". I think that is too trite and slips too easily off our lips. But I do believe that Jesus is the rock to which we cling, the foundation on which we build as we seek to find the answers in life. For those in society who are marginalised or lost or lonely, we need to introduce them to Jesus Christ as the rock to which they can cling as they seek to find the answers they need in their own situations of pain.

Jesus said, 'Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest'. This is a message that so many people in our society need to hear and a Church that models its ministry on Merson's Sphinx will not be shy in proclaiming that message as it offers the Christ-child as the Light of the World.

The Sphinx provides a resting place for exhausted Mary

It is not just enough to proclaim the message of Christ, of course: we cannot just offer a spiritual blessing to the hurting, the homeless and the dispossessed. It is not enough just to say, 'God bless you in your troubles'. A Sphinx-like Church will provide practical support and assistance – and that is what we see in the painting.

Not only does the Sphinx cradle Christ, it offers Mary the rest and the protection she needs in a most practical way. And as the Sphinx offers protection from the ravages of the night, so Mary is able to feel safe and secure in its tender care. Mary gives herself completely over to the care of the Sphinx. She relaxes fully into its support. She is utterly reliant on its watchfulness and protection. The Sphinx becomes for Mary a place of practical sanctuary. And for those in our society who are marginalised and vulnerable, the Church should play that role too.

We, who have so little to offer can, like the Sphinx in this painting, offer refuge and rest to those who are in need of refreshment. The Church must be a healing place, or it is no place at all...

So, firstly, the Church offers the Christ-child to the world; secondly, the Church provides a healing place for those in need; thirdly and finally...

The Sphinx gazes heavenwards

I don't know much about these things, I'm afraid, but I am given to understand that Sphinxes usually stare forward unflinchingly. But here, in Merson's painting, the Sphinx gazes heavenward. In fact, only the Christ-child and the Sphinx have their eyes raised to the heavens: Mary, Joseph and the donkey, in their exhaustion, face the earth. It is as if the Sphinx and the Christ-child share the secret of eternity in this intimate moment.

As a Church, we are called to constantly engage in social action; to challenge social injustice wherever we find it and to work alongside the dispossessed and the marginalised. But, as we undertake that practical ministry, we must never avert our gaze from heaven. We must never lose a sense of our motivation. We must never lose a sense of our primary calling, which is the worship of God. If we engage solely in social justice issues and lose our heavenly gaze, we will lose the whole purpose of why we have been set apart for God and we will lose ourselves in the work at the expense of our sacred calling.

The Church is a people of worship; a people whose gaze is fixed on heaven. And it is precisely because our gaze is fixed on heaven that we are able to minister effectively in the name of Jesus.

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Our ministry, then, is to be like the sphinx: to hold the Christ-child before a hurting world and to provide a place of sanctuary and healing rest for those in need – and, at all times, to keep our gaze on heaven.

In writing his Gospel, Matthew had a very deliberate theological agenda: he wanted to present Jesus Christ as the new Moses who would lead his people out of slavery into the Promised Land. Jesus Christ, the new Moses, was the Light of the World – and we too are called to be lights in the world. As the church fulfils this Sphinx-like ministry in society today, so those in need will be blessed by an experience of Jesus Christ: the new Moses,

the deliverer, who will lead them into the Promised Land and enable all those who need healing to touch eternity and to find peace there.

You probably know the poem written by a woman who had experienced homelessness herself and she went to a local church for help but was rejected and treated with contempt. This is what she wrote:

> I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club to discuss my hunger.
> I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly and prayed for my release.
> I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.
> I was homeless, and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the Love of God.
> I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me.
>
> You seem so holy, so close to God. But I'm still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.

The Church of the Sphinx will never again allow a situation where a poem like that needs to be written.

Luc-Olivier Merson (1846–1920), *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* (1880), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston