

When Christmas is sad: Matthew 2.16-18

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

*Herod then with fear was filled,
A prince, he said, in Jewry!
All the little boys he killed
At Bethehem in his fury,
At Bethlehem in his fury.*

Christmas is a great time for memories — and not all memories are happy ones. There will be many families this year coping with an empty place at the Christmas table, with a raw sense of loss that time will dull, but never fully heal: the scars will always be there. And even good memories can hurt, when the person we remember isn't there to give us a hug this Christmas.

I have a special fondness for this verse from Matthew's story of Christmas. It reminds me of a Christmas Eve, over 40 years ago, when I stood in church in Handforth, singing carols at a crowded, candlelit midnight service, with tears streaming down my face — and the only words that meant anything to me in the entire service that night were these: *Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.* Good for you, Rachel, I thought — don't let them comfort you.

Why? Because the year before, when everybody else was celebrating Christmas, I had gone into hospital to have my second baby — but the baby was stillborn. One of the hardest moments was trying to explain it to my daughter, who was three years old. Her Dad had tried to explain to her what had happened, but it wasn't until I got home — with no baby — that she fully understood. I can still hear her wailing, "Then I'm not going to have a baby brother after all!"

Time is — despite everything — a great healer. By the following Christmas, the next baby was on the way, and Tom was safely born the following June (though not without giving us a few scares along the way). I had a lot to be thankful for. The scars were healing; but you don't forget the loss — it's always part of you, even the loss of someone you never met. And Christmas is a time when the memories come flooding back.

I learnt two important things that Christmas night. One is that when you need to have a good cry (and we all do, one time or another), then church is as good a place as any — and a lot better than some. It was dark, it was crowded, nobody was looking at me — and nobody noticed a thing. I felt reassured in Rachel's company, weeping for my lost baby — because it was the right and proper thing to do, and somehow being there that night helped me to weep in a way that I needed to, a way that I couldn't at the time, when the shock and the suddenness of it all left me feeling numb. So I always thank God for Rachel and her stubborn refusal to be comforted.

And the other thing I learned — because of Rachel, because she was always part of the Christmas story — was that there is room for grief at Christmas as well as joy. We have a tendency to iron out the sad bits of the Christmas story, to make everything relentlessly jolly because we don't want to spoil the party. But that makes Christmas an illusion, a conjuring trick, a fairy-tale that we tell the children but don't really believe ourselves. But children know as well as adults that sad things do happen (even in fairy-tales). What they need is not the illusion that it doesn't happen, but the courage and the resilience to cope with it when it does.

And the original Christmas story, the story that has sustained faith and hope and love across the generations, is a story that has room for pain and grief. It's the story of a baby — the ultimate in vulnerability — born into a dangerous world, a world of grief as well as joy. The moment of birth is always a moment of danger for mother and child, even with all the resources of a modern hospital: all the more so for Mary, giving birth in a stable, far from the safety of home and family. Birth and death are always very close together (maybe that's why Christmas night is a portal, a special time for memories).

So who is Rachel? She's the ancestor of the tribe, the quintessential mother, grieving for the loss of her children, knowing that each one is precious. Matthew is quoting from Jeremiah 31.15, where the prophet imagines Rachel weeping inconsolably for what has happened to her people in the destruction of Jerusalem. In Matthew's story, she stands for the mothers of Bethlehem, weeping for their children who were slaughtered by King Herod because he was afraid that when he grew up, Jesus would challenge his claim to the throne. It was the Wise Men who tragically set off that tragic turn of events when they stopped off in Jerusalem to ask Herod if he knew where the new king was to be born. ...

You came at last to the final stage of your pilgrimage and the great star stood still above you. What did you do? You stopped to call on King Herod. Deadly exchange of compliments in which began the unended war of mobs and magistrates against the innocent! Yet you came, and were not turned away. You too found room before the manger. [Evelyn Waugh]

Who is Rachel? She is every mother (or father) who has lost a child, everyone who struggles with pain and loss and feels excluded when everyone else is rejoicing. She reminds us that the loss is real, that it's OK to cry — we don't have to pretend. But she also reminds us that the baby whom we celebrate at Christmas is a baby who shares the pain and danger of human life, especially of those born into the underside, those whose lives appear to have no value. She reminds us that every life has value in God's story — that he shares our sadness as well as our gladness. That there is a direct line linking the baby we celebrate at Christmas to the cross of calvary and the crown of thorns: the baby whose name is Emmanuel, God with us.

Thank you for letting me share my story. If you have a story you would like to share with me or Robin or one of the ministry team, do get in touch by email.
God bless,
Loveday