

4. Beate Heinen – Journey to Egypt (Moved on or moving On?)

Some of you may already be familiar with this image because it is used on the cover of the book “All this for you” which explores the meaning of baptism in the Methodist Church. It was painted in 1993 by the German artist Beate Heinen and is entitled – O Heiland, reiB die Himmel auf (O Saviour, tear open the heavens). The blurb on the back of the book says this: *The image picks out in a shaft of gold the baby Jesus with his mother and father – the Christ child who comes to be part of the ordinary crowd of humanity.* I want to use this image to illustrate how the Holy Family became refugees when they journeyed to Egypt. So let’s listen to the Biblical account of this experience:

MATTHEW 2:13-18

I love being at airports and train stations because I really enjoy watching people and trying to work out who they are and who they are with, where they are going, where they are coming from and what the purpose of their journey is.

There is a reason for every journey we make. Some people at airports and train stations are there by choice. They are going on holiday to a destination of their choosing. Other people are there because of the requirements of their job. They are commuting to work or going on a business trip. There are also people – like Mary and Joseph – who are forced to travel to another place because it is too dangerous for them to stay at home. And there are people in this room who have come to Britain in order to escape from genocide, violence and war in their home countries.

Jesus himself became a refugee at the very beginning of his life. He had to flee to Egypt in order to escape Herod who wanted to kill him. Jesus and his parents share in the experience of all who have to leave their homes, their friends and many of their possessions and escape by night to a place of sanctuary. This image seems to capture the experience of the crowds of people in our world today who are moving

and travelling on not because they choose to but because they are forced to.

This image also reminds me of travelling on the Moscow metro in rush-hour. I spent the 1991-1992 academic year studying at Moscow Linguistic University and my local metro station was Park Kultury. This is one of the stations that was targeted by the suicide bombers just a couple of weeks ago. Park Kultury is a major interchange for two lines – the circle line and the central line which goes to the Kremlin and all the major business and tourist sites in Moscow. There is a very small ticket hall at street level and from there you just get swept into the crowd and find yourself on the escalator with very little sense of your feet actually touching the ground. As you go down the escalator you can see a mass of people slowly shuffling forward and you have no option but to just go with the flow until you are finally shoved onto a train and hope and pray you are able to push your way through to the exit when you reach your stop!

When travelling with other people it is very easy to get separated and I notice how Joseph is keeping very close to Mary in the picture - with his hand supporting both her and Jesus – just as I used to cling on to friends who came to visit me in Russia. We were all petrified that they might get lost and never be able to find me again!

As soon as I heard on the radio about what had happened on the Moscow metro I sent a text message to the Bishop. “Were you on the metro this morning?” I asked. “Are you okay?” I soon received a response to say that he was fine and that there had been no Methodist casualties. I immediately felt very relieved that no-one I knew had been affected – but then I felt guilty. It was as if I had highlighted certain people in the crowd who were important to me – just as the Holy Family are highlighted in the painting – and did not really care about anyone else. I get very irritated whenever a disaster strikes and we are told how many British casualties there were – as if we only need to care about our own people – and yet here I was doing exactly the same thing. There were no Methodist casualties. Therefore I could relax!

The Bible passage we heard earlier ended with this verse: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more”.

Ramah was the place where Nebuchadnezzar’s troops assembled the Israelites and then deported them to captivity in Babylon. Rachel was the mother of two of the sons of Israel but here she weeps not just for her own children but for all the Israelites and for all the innocents massacred in Bethlehem. This is a call to us to be concerned not just about our own people but about everyone. And this is not easy. For various reasons, we all have a special interest in particular places or groups of people. I am more likely to read a newspaper article about Russian than one about China. One of my closest friends is Anglican Bishop in Harare so I am far more aware of the struggles of the church in Zimbabwe than the struggles of the church in Nigeria.

And it is not just geographical connections which limit our concern. If we have a friend or relative who has a particular illness or disability we will have a bias towards charities and campaigns which support them. If we know someone who is homeless or an asylum seeker or the victim of domestic violence or bullying we will be far more passionate about those issues than about others.

We have already made choices about the seminars to which we will be going this afternoon. I am sure that all of them are going to be very moving and we may even find ourselves weeping as Rachel did. Some of you may be going to hear more about areas of work which you are already very committed to. Others of you are going to learn about something of which you currently blissfully ignorant. I hope that we will take the opportunity to ask one another about the seminars which we were not able to go to so that we can broaden our horizons and hold in our hearts and in our prayers not only those people who stand out from the crowd for us – but that seething mass of humanity who constantly surround us and whom we can never know personally but who are nevertheless our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Journey to Egypt

1. What/who prompted you to journey to Swanwick this weekend?
2. What is the largest crowd of people that you have been part of? How did it make you feel?
3. What issues/people/parts of the world are “highlighted” for you and why?
4. What experience have you had of being “moved on” forcibly rather than “moving on” voluntarily?
5. What seminars are you going to this afternoon? What made you choose them?