

**Homily: December 29-30, 2007**

**In his controversial movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson dramatizes the events of Jesus' agony during the crucifixion, including a scene where Jesus stumbles and helplessly falls to the ground. Mary, who is following the struggles of her son on the road to Calvary, is horrified. As she stares in anguish at her son sprawled in the dust, her memory flashes back to a scene from Jesus' childhood. She recalls how the boy Jesus fell while playing and how she ran to him, how she comforted and consoled him. The scene is startling and effective, because it reminds us that Jesus did not just appear on the scene as an adult. He had a childhood. And that childhood, too, adds an important dimension to the gospel message of God's Son coming into the world to suffer and die on the cross.**

**Matthew may have had this thought in mind when he included in his Gospel the story we just learned. The flight into Egypt and the return to Nazareth mark the end of Matthew's infancy narrative. After today's account, Matthew leaps forward in time to the start of Jesus' public ministry, starting with his baptism by John the Baptist. The drama that builds as Jesus confronts hostile Jewish authorities reaches a crescendo at Calvary. The cross is the central symbol of the passion narrative. And yet, if we are attentive, we see how the infancy narrative as well contains subtle but real connections to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The shadow of the cross is present, even in Bethlehem.**

**The Gospel we just heard shows that from his earliest days Jesus attracted the hostility of the powerful who feared losing power. An angel warns Joseph in a dream that Herod intends to search for the child and destroy him (Matthew 2:13). Scholars tell us that the Greek verb for destroy, *apollynai*, which Matthew uses to express the angel's warning to Joseph, "Herod is going to search for the child to destroy Jesus (Matthew 27:20). Matthew seems to be telling us that at both the beginning and end of his life Jesus was vulnerable. The forces that would demand his life in the praetorium at Jerusalem were also conspiring to take his life in the stable at Bethlehem. The familiar and warm images of the baby Jesus in a manger surrounded by shepherds and magi cannot entirely obscure the reality of the cross that will follow him throughout his life.**

**But like the passion narrative that would come much later in Matthew's Gospel, the infancy narrative reveals another more powerful force at work in the unfolding drama. Just as God did not abandon Jesus at Calvary, so too God would act to save the child Jesus, warning him through the mediation of an angel and protecting him through the courage and skill of his foster father, Joseph. Through the use of the long genealogy of Jesus, Matthew shows us that Jesus was truly the son of David, son of Abraham. Today's account assures us that God would not allow the promise of a savior to be thwarted by any worldly force.**

**If the cross followed Jesus throughout his childhood, then we should not be surprised that the cross is present in the lives of our own children as well. Millions of children today, both the born and the unborn, are vulnerable to powerful forces beyond their control. Now it is not the hostility of Herod that haunts the smallest representatives of Christ; it is, instead, the scourge of being unwanted, the evil of hunger and disease, the forces of war and dislocation that stalk the most vulnerable among us. The cross that casts its shadow over the children of our world today is the same cross that followed Jesus from Bethlehem to Calvary.**

**We cannot know with much certainty any of the details of Jesus' early life. But this we can know with certainty; Jesus was vulnerable before the forces of his day. But from the very beginning to the very end Jesus would know the loving protection of his Father, manifested in the care and protection of his foster father, Joseph, and his mother, Mary. We now stand in the place of Joseph and Mary, protecting, nurturing, and caring for the children who stand in the place of the child Jesus.**