What a funny thing to do – to start the sermon for this morning with yesterday’s news!

These words about the star are in the text just before this morning’s Gospel and they fill me with delight too. The kings arrive all splendid with gifts after a long and hazardous journey, including an unwise detour to the wily Herod, and fall down in worship before a tiny baby with his Mother. There is a sense of profound joy and homecoming caught up in this simple phrase – The sight of the star filled them with delight.

It is as many of us feel about Christmas day itself, and the stories which follow must be placed in that context – of peace and belonging and careful unwrapping of presents and whoops of delight. (I am the proud owner of a Google Nexus and cannot wait to have a few moments peace to play with it, and now I have a whole week off – joy!)

But the snapshots in the original Christmas story continue less comfortably in today’s Gospel.

No sooner is the tableau of peace and worship over than the young family, already existing under the rather sinister conditions of mass travel to complete a census – have now to flee the wrath of a despotic Herod, to hide in Egypt until the years of Herod’s influence are over.

He is so furious at being tricked by the wise men that he wreaks revenge on Bethlehem where in the tradition of tyrants across the world and down through history the most vulnerable cop it. Can’t have one child – kill the whole lot!

Summing up the desolate pain and despair of this story, and the powerlessness of the weak, these lines Rachel weeping for her children, because they were not.

Rachel was the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin – she had watched her whole people Israel gradually starving to death after one bad harvest after the next and had cried over the loss of Joseph and then the disappearance of young Benjamin down into Egypt. Her grave was in Bethlehem and not far away was Ramah, that place where the exiles being led off in chains down to Babylon from Jerusalem left Jeremiah behind, the point of no return on their journey into exile.

And as we hear Rachel weeping we see a million scenes
Jewish children on train platforms being herded into cattle trucks,
The children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,
Children feeling Syria and some caught in the shelling unable to flee
The children of South Sudan.

We see the news of a few days after Christmas and we must ask ourselves how do we hold these snapshots together. How do we worship and celebrate at peace whilst others suffer death at the hands of another Herod? How do we hold together the rescued Jesus with his gentle brave mother and wise insightful father and the murder of the innocents? How?
We do it by recognising what sort of event Christmas is. If we treat it as a day out of time – a great
day but soon over, then we will view today's Gospel stories and indeed what is going on around us in
the world as something to watch, to mourn perhaps but essentially to watch – now a disaster
happens, but now we rejoice because a child is saved from the rubble, now another blood filled war
breaks out, but our news is that the recession is almost over, lurching from crisis to crisis feeling
powerless and rejoicing with huge sentimentality over small signs of hope. That is the effect of
understanding Christmas day as a day out of time.

But if we view Christmas Day not as a day out of time but as the invitation to a journey we will feel
very differently about it and about our own place in the world and experience for ourselves the good
news of Christmas as a present lasting for ever.

When Jesus goes down into Egypt he steps into the history of one of Israel's greatest sons, the sort
of Nelson Mandela of his own day and race, Joseph, son of Jacob. Joseph you recall with his
arrogant boasting and coat of many colours was tossed into a pit and sold into slavery by his own
brothers. But under Pharoah he made very good in his country of exile which was Egypt so that
when his brothers came to him starving he forgave them and showed them God's mercy. He
allowed them and Israel itself to recover from famine and to live again. The journey to which
Christmas is an invitation is to step with Jesus into these footsteps of mercy – that merciful
forgiveness and loving kindness which is the very being of God, and which our world needs so badly,
which our families and friends need so clearly, and which we ourselves need so deeply.

Jesus lived this mercy in all he said and thought and did.

He grew up to recognise the raging spite of Herod within us all as a human possibility. He saw the
ways we subtly kick the already down-trodden, the style we have of inviting only those who reward
us into our friendships and homes, the need to exclude the different, to scapegoat the other instead
of admitting the trouble we ourselves cause. Yet instead of condemning us he offered us mercy –
Father forgive them because they do not know what they are doing. Jesus realised just how difficult
it is to make peace among human beings and took upon himself the burden of doing that, instead of
more easily passing on blame and spite.

Now, it is easy for me to concentrate on showing mercy in the domestic and parochial spheres where
I mostly hang out. But I can see how the routes towards mercy lived out in paths and negotiations
towards reconciliation are needed on the world stage too. Herod does not have to have the final say.
This past year I have been delighted on General Synod to start to work with people trained in peace
making and reconciliation skills so that we have begun to overcome the most painful difficulties
over women's leadership in the Church, difficulties which have been hard to bear on all sides
through my whole professional life now nearing resolution. Human beings can change – we are
invited to step out with Jesus into the footprints of mercy he shows us. Let that happen on the
world stage too and let us help that happen however we may for the future of the world.

Did you hear the bells this morning, or perhaps on Christmas Day, live or perhaps on the radio?
One of my favourite stories of mercy is about just such a church bell. The monk Thomas Merton,
before he became a religious brother, already a successful young journalist and working in the slums
of Harlem, desperate with anxiety about what to do with his life, heard in a dream the great bell
tolling which hung over the entrance to the monastery of Gethsemane deep in heart of Kentucky. It
was as if this bell was ringing him home. And its message, he said, as it swung to and fro, to and fro
through the night air was this, “Mercy upon Mercy upon Mercy”, “Mercy upon Mercy upon Mercy.”
Mercy, the very being of God, and the sign above the door was Peace to all who enter. Pax
Intrantibus. The Christmas Message.
Perhaps as you wait for the bells of New Year to ring out you might think of Christmas 2013 not as a day out of time but as invitation to a journey, to step with Jesus wherever you are called to go in peace, with reconciliation and above all mercy. Amen.