

# What if?

The story, "What if?" was written by the Rev Margie Dahl of the Southern Peninsula Uniting Church, Victoria.

Reader

As soon as Joseph woke up he knew that something was wrong. What it was, he didn't know. But his instincts told him that things were not right. It was almost as if he had dreamed about a terrible danger. They had been in Bethlehem for some time now. Mary really wasn't ready to travel all the way back to Nazareth with the kid yet, and he had got a good job in a lumber yard. Jesus had just started to walk and had the cheekiest smile. Life was good. But today, Joseph was worried.

Joseph got on the phone to his friend Fred in the next town. "I don't know what's up, Joseph," said Fred, "but we've had army trucks full of heavily armed soldiers rumbling through the streets and I think they're on their way to Bethlehem."

Joseph didn't waste any time. He grabbed Mary and Jesus - they didn't even have time to pack anything - and drove their old bomb down to the bank. He took out as much money as he could from the ATM and headed off to the airport. "Egypt", thought Joseph. "That would be the place to go." The pilot of the small plane was a real sleaze bag. He knew a desperate family when he saw one. The price was exorbitant. He managed to get every cent they had got from the bank, but really, there was no choice. They would be leaving the country with nothing.

As soon as the plane touched down at Cairo International, it was surrounded by immigration officials. Of course Mary, Joseph and the baby had no passports, no visas, no documents of any sort to prove who they were. They tried to explain, but as the officials said, they were only doing their job. The family were taken to a Detention Centre outside of town. It was steaming hot, but there was no air conditioning. Around the perimeter was a fence with razor wire on top. The food was disgusting, not at all what they were used to. Joseph knew that there were lawyers who would do their best to help them, but they could not get to them. Mary tried to comfort Joseph, but he was in despair. It seemed that they could not get anyone to take their case.

Of course, Mary and Joseph were not the only family to arrive in Cairo. More and more families - lucky families - arrived with their treasured babies, but also with horrific stories from back home of babies being dragged from their mother's arms and shot in the street. The streets were full of screaming parents cradling the lifeless bodies of their babies.

Over the next week, the Egyptians opened their morning papers, drank their coffees and read the stories from the refugees. They all agreed that it was very sad, but it was not their problem, that the country could simply not cope with a great influx of refugees and besides, times were hard and their own children didn't have work. It was a pity, they said, but the refugees would just have to go back.

What if the government of Egypt decided to take a moral stand? What if they decided to let the refugees stay against the wishes of their own people? What if it was found that the children were the first ones to break the ice.

But what if the story had a different ending. Mary and Joseph and the other couples prayed fervently every day to be allowed to stay in Egypt. They knew that not all Egyptians were unsympathetic, but their supporters on the outside were pretty powerless. Then one day, their nightmares came true. Soldiers arrived at the Detention Centre, herded everyone onto buses and took them to the airport. Before they knew what had happened, they were on a plane back to Bethlehem - all except one woman who, with her baby, had thrown herself off the roof of the Centre. Her husband sat on the plane in a daze.

When the people got off the plane they were met by laughing soldiers. "Thought you could get away, did you." They were all bused down to the Bethlehem Cricket Ground and jammed onto the oval. There, the slaughter began. All the babies were murdered, along with any parents who resisted. Mary, Joseph and the baby all died in the madness.

Back in Cairo, the refugees' supporters wrote urgent letters to the Minister for Immigration and picketed her office. But they were too late.