

### ***Kings in Conflict***

In the name of him who was born under the law to redeem those under the law, so that in him we might receive adoption as sons, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading comes at us like a sudden sucker punch, don't you think? We go from the touching nativity scene just the other night, with the holy couple huddled together in wonder by the manger in which the Christ child lies sleeping peacefully on the hay, while shepherds kneel in adoration, and heavenly choirs of angels sing anthems sweet to *this*: the brutal massacre in Bethlehem where Herod's soldiers wrench screaming babies from their mothers' arms and mercilessly slaughter them with cold steel – the anguished wails of grieving parents drowning out whatever lingering echoes may remain of the angels' song of joy.

As awful as it is, I suppose we need such a harsh upset to move us from what has unfortunately become an overly romanticized view of Christmas – with the sentimental songs, the cookies and hot chocolate, the warm fuzzies, and the “Aw, isn't that nice” – to the grim reality of why it was that the Word of God became our brother in flesh. This episode coming right on the heels of our Savior's birth reminds us of the kind dark, loveless world that Christ came into, of the horrific evil of which mankind is capable, and why it is that sinners like ourselves so desperately need to be saved.

The main villain in this morning's narrative is King Herod, called “Herod the Great” by his contemporaries; but the only thing great about him was his super-sized ego. I suppose it's also accurate to say that in his younger years at least, he was a master of self promotion, an audacious opportunist, and a skillful politician in all the worst senses of the term. He knew how to make himself look good. And that's what he did for himself in the eyes of the Romans. You see, the Romans had conquered the land of Israel and the surrounding countries, and normally they preferred to rule over the territories they occupied through friendly surrogates; that is, they thought conquered peoples would be more cooperative and less hostile to Rome if they were ruled over locally by one of their own. And so, during a time of instability and change in the leadership of the Roman government, through a shrewd combination of bribes, flattery, secret alliances, advantageous marriages, and promises of loyalty, he managed to convince many of the key players that he was someone worthy and important who could rule well over the land of the Jews on behalf of the Roman Empire.

Thus it happened in 40 BC that the Roman Senate appointed Herod as the king of the Jews. And it's rather odd because Herod wasn't a Jew, nor was he of royal descent. He was in fact an Idumean by race; that is, a descendant of Esau, who was the brother of Israel through whom the Jews descended. And the Idumeans (or Edomites as they're called in the Old Testament) had a long history of being bitter *enemies* of the Jews. So imagine being a Jew and learning that the Romans (whom you hate for conquering your land and making you pay tribute) had made your king a man from a race of some of your worst historic enemies. Needless to say, it didn't go over very well; but Herod had an answer for that too. I told you he was a politician, didn't I? In order to win the acceptance if not the hearts of his citizens, publicly he pretended to be, in a religious sense anyway, a pious and observant Jew; and he began a very impressive building campaign to renovate and greatly expand the Temple complex in Jerusalem. This got many of the religious leaders on his side, who were more than willing to go along with him as long as he was benefitting them. They in turn had a lot of influence over the people. And,

because the religious leaders were getting what they wanted from Herod, they were willing to look the other way when he did a lot of very immoral and un-Jewish things.

What sort of things? Well, just for example, he maintained a very indulgent lifestyle, building many lavish palaces for himself, his numerous harems, and his various wives (depending on how you count, there were ten or twelve of them at different times). These palaces dotted the landscape, and were the sites of all kinds of drunken feasts and orgies. And like I said, though Herod publicly pretended to be a Jew in a religious sense, he hedged his bets by worshipping any number of false gods. Evidently he wanted to make sure all the bases were covered – just in case. He also had astrologers, necromancers, and sorcerers on the payroll to foretell the future and advise him with their prognostications – all of which the Lord sharply condemns in his Holy Word.

That was Herod in his younger days. As he got older, he only got worse; and to everything else that was wrong with his heart was added a growing sense of paranoia. He lived in constant fear that people were conspiring against him and plotting to kill him and set up another king in his place. These deep-seated fears, which kept increasing over time, led him to lash out with swift and startling cruelty to anyone he even suspected might be involved in a plot against him. Not surprisingly, these attacks were directed largely against his own sons and other members of his family, since they had the most to gain by his death. He killed many of them – leading Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, to quip that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son. You see, by pretending publicly to adhere to the Jewish faith, Herod was not allowed to eat pork. He did eat pork; but for appearances sake, not in front of conservative Jews and not very often. His sons had no such protection, and neither did anyone else whom Herod's increasingly mistrustful mind suspect of plotting against him.

We should ask, though, why did Herod grow so fearful and suspicious of everyone around him? The answer is obvious. At some level he knew very well that he was no king – and certainly not the king of the Jews. Sure, he had the job and the title; but he only acquired and held them through deception and hypocrisy. He knew inside that he was a big phony. He wasn't who he represented himself to be to the Romans or who he pretended to be to his subjects. And the truth of the matter was that pretty much everyone knew it. Both the Romans and his subjects knew the truth about him, but they played along because it was to their advantage. And Herod, knowing that he landed his position through dishonest means, must have figured it was only a matter of time before someone more conniving, clever, and ruthless did the same thing to him. And the problem only exacerbated itself. As he became more suspicious and violent, people began to hate and fear him more, making it more likely that someone would try to overthrow him. To be sure, knowing how much his subjects hated him, toward the end of his life, as he lay dying, he ordered that the heads of hundreds of noble families be rounded up and taken to a stadium in Caesarea. Upon his death they were to be executed. That was the only way, Herod reasoned, he could guarantee that there would be weeping and mourning throughout the land when he died. Heck of a guy, huh?

I tell you these things so that you'll better understand what his mindset was when the wise men from the east showed up seeking a newborn King of the Jews. By this time Herod was quite old and at the height of his paranoid fears. And here are strangers from hundreds of miles away with what was disturbing news for him: a rival had been born. "How could they have known about this when I haven't heard a word about it? I've got my spies everywhere; why I even have spies watching my spies!" Herod knows that it's been a long time since he fathered a child, and he also knows enough about the Scriptures to understand that the Jewish people are looking forward to coming of a king from the line of David – a *genuine* king of the Jews. He

comes to the correct conclusion that the one the wise men are seeking is no interloper like himself; this is the real deal. He gives the wise men instructions to find the Christ child and report back to him so that he too may pay homage. But we know he has other plans. The birth of this child is the biggest threat yet to his throne. This child scares him – gives him a rotting fear deep inside his bones that makes him tremble. This child must be destroyed.

He waits impatiently for the wise men to return; but when he inquires of his spies several days later, he discovers to his alarm that the eastern sages have already left the country. It seems everyone is conspiring against him. In panic induced rage he orders the slaughter of boys two years old and younger in and around Bethlehem. I suppose that if the bulletin pictures it correctly, he could have told them just to look for the family with the halos on their heads. But it's not correct; and he wasn't taking any chances. He who killed so many others to protect his throne, including many of his own sons, had no compunction about killing the children of others. How foolish, though, to imagine that he could thwart the plans and purposes of the Lord. Having been warned by an angel in a dream, the holy family was already safely beyond his reach.

But this raises a sticky question. How could the Lord allow this to happen? Sure, he got the baby Jesus out of harm's way; but what about the others? Why didn't he spare them? It's not like he didn't see it coming. The horror of that massacre was even predicted in prophecy: Jeremiah foresaw the wailing of the mothers of Bethlehem personified in Rachel, the wife of the patriarch Jacob, who had died in childbirth near Bethlehem, weeping for her lost children. How could the Lord allow such a horrendous crime to take place – one man's fear of having his life overturned by the birth of Christ resulting in so many other needless deaths?

Perhaps a better question is to ask why he lets a much worse crime go on today. Herod, at least, acted in fear for his life. He believed the Christ child was a threat to his very existence. In our day thousands of unborn babies are murdered every day merely because their parents believe they will be an inconvenience to their lives. And the society in which we live finds this perfectly acceptable. Oh some folks will say it's regrettable; but as far as they are concerned there's no crime involved. But I put it to you: who bears the greater guilt? A man nearly insane with fear who ordered the death of perhaps a few dozen infants knowing that what he did was a crime against humanity; or a nation that considers itself enlightened because it approves of the murder of millions of its infants? And isn't it true that even those of us who are rightly opposed to the sin of abortion, when we think about Herod's crime it's an indignant "How could anyone do such a monstrous thing"; but when it comes to what we're faced with, it's "Oh well, that's the way things are. What can you do?"

It really is a dark and loveless world we live in. And what I'd have you see is that we're all a part of making it that way. It's easy to sharp-shoot Herod and those who promote, run, and utilize the abortion industry for putting themselves and their precious lifestyles above the lives of defenseless infants; but these are only obvious manifestations of the same sin we all hold in our hearts. We want to be in charge. Whether it's in just our own lives or in something bigger, there's someplace or something over which we want to be king – where we want to have it our way and for others to serve us. And heaven help whoever it is that we suspect might be trying to take that kingdom away. Oh, we may not physically kill them; but we'll lie to them, we'll undermine them, we'll assassinate their characters and ruin their reputations; we'll do whatever it takes. We've got to protect our turf. And we'll do the best we can to convince ourselves that we're right for doing it. We'll say that we're only defending our rights or our freedoms or some other precious abstraction. But, you know, deep down inside we all know that we're phonies. We aren't who we represent ourselves to be to God or to each other. We try to hide the truth

that inside each one of us is a selfish king who wants to be in charge and to be served and to be able to indulge ourselves in whatever sin or excess that floats our boats; but we all know the truth. And that's why we're all frightened by the birth of Christ to some degree. He was born to be a real king. He comes to rule our hearts and minds in order to conform us to God's will. And that sinful, selfish king in each one of us refuses to yield – he doesn't want to be dethroned. That king rightly understands that there can only be one king in the heart. It's him or me. And no, I might not be able to destroy him completely; but I can try to kill him in here – and we do every time we sin against the Lord and against others. Earlier I asked why God allows sinners to do terrible things. It's the wrong question. You should be asking why God allows *you* to do terrible things. Why doesn't he stop you? Why doesn't he destroy you so that you can't hurt anyone else?

The answer is that he's merciful. He does not desire the death of sinners, but rather that sinners turn to him and live. That's why he sent his Son into this world first not as a mighty king to rule over you by force and with threats and terrors, to crush sinners under his feet; but in weakness and humility as a messenger of God's kingdom and a Savior. He came as servant – to serve you by proclaiming the kingdom of God, living a perfect life, and carrying the burden of your sins when he took upon himself their just penalty on the cross. This King was born to die so that you might live. This King wore a crown of thorns that he might place upon your head a crown of life. And while he patiently calls sinners to repentance and life so that they may enjoy his kingdom, it's necessary that he allows sin to continue for now – yes, even sins as terrible as those committed by Herod and Hitler *and you*; for no one is beyond the reach of his love and forgiveness.

The thing to see is that the sins he allows to continue don't have to be yours. Now that he has been born and come into your life, and has made you a child of God and an heir with him of his heavenly kingdom through Baptism, you don't have to allow yourself to be ruled by the wicked old Herod within you. I said before, it's him or me. Why not let it be him? Why not let the King who will rule for all eternity begin to reign in your heart now? Why not use as your example the forgotten king in today's Gospel reading?

What? There's a king other than Herod and Jesus? Yes, there is: it's Joseph. He is legitimately the King of the Jews. He is the descendant of David who would be on the throne if the kingdom had not been lost to the control of foreign powers. It's through him that Jesus as his legal heir becomes king. But more importantly for our consideration, he's the one who actually behaves like a king of the kingdom of God should. He listens to the Lord. He acts for the benefit of others. More than anything, he serves the Lord by preserving the life of the Christ child entrusted to his care. That's what we need to be doing: zealously guarding Christ who has been given to us. We need to nourish him with God's Word so that he grows in our hearts and drives out that fearful, antagonistic Herod within. We need to listen to his voice and act on his behalf, serving others even as he serves us. We need to do this now in time so that in eternity it can be said, "Those seeking to destroy the child in here are dead, never to rise again."

We can be illegitimate kings who reign against him in time or we can be legitimate kings who reign with him forever. Therefore confessing our sins and receiving his forgiveness, let us choose not be kings in conflict with him; rather let us acknowledge, rejoice, and live in his reign right now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***