

03 January 2021, The 2nd Sunday after Christmas: Matthew 2:13-23

Christmas is the mirror image of Easter. In Holy Week we begin with the ironic, sad events of Palm Sunday; Jesus enters Jerusalem hailed as King, by Good Friday he is dead. Yet Sunday comes; death cannot contain God's salvation. We begin with tragedy and end with triumph.

Christmas begins with promise and joy: Old Testament prophecies come true, the child is born, earth and heaven rejoice. The Christmas story in Matthew concludes with forced exile and the slaughter of innocent children. Like tyrants before and after, Herod slaughters the weak and defenseless in an attempt not only to kill Jesus but also, no doubt, to intimidate anyone who might have heard of the birth and whose messianic hopes were thereby aroused. A man like Herod, who killed some of his own sons and relatives, would not hesitate to kill the sons of others.

Jesus' birth provokes hostility in those who will not bow down to anything but themselves. Not all the world, then or now, welcomes God's presence in human affairs. Indeed, some days it seems that far more people take no thought of God's sovereignty. This struggle between Herod and the Christ is waged outwardly in the world and inwardly in every person. Who shall rule? To whom shall allegiance be given? Herod ought not be dismissed simply as a caricature: a 1st Century Darth Vader. As theologian Frederick Dale Bruner wrote: *Those who begin by hating the (Christ) Child will end by hurting children. Hating revelation leads to hurting people. If people will be ungodly, they will be inhumane. Herod is the gospel's earliest evidence of this fact.*

In Matthew's Gospel there is a stark contrast between two characters who react to Christ's birth. Herod is a megalomaniacal mass murderer; Joseph submits to God and serves the Christ child by protecting him. Joseph is the human counterpoint to Herod's refusal of God's rule. Making lengthy journeys, living patiently in exile, and finding a new home are costs of faithfulness he willingly bears. Joseph is attentive as God unfolds His will for Jesus, for Mary and for Joseph himself. Joseph accepts God's desires and steps out boldly on the path he is to walk with his family.

Herod is not just a bad man; his behavior is not simply reprehensible. Normal, average human beings—like you and me—may not rule kingdoms, but we can be “little Herod's” nonetheless. We may not slaughter whole villages of children, but we might very well kill with a thought, savage with a word, do violence with our everyday actions.

It is simple to find out if one shares Herod's delusions of authority and sovereignty:

Are you lord of your life or do you daily, consciously commit yourself to God?

When making decisions, large or small, do you rely on your own wits alone, or do you submit the question in prayer to God?

Do you pattern your life after what is clearly God's will, revealed in the Scriptures and the historic Faith, or are you your own moral compass?

Do you rely on God's power at work in your life or do you think of God as someone to call upon when you get into a scrape?

Do you desire God to convert you always more into someone glorifying Christ and serving others in His Name, or are you fine just the way you are?

Are you giving your life—words, deeds, and thoughts; failures and goodness—to God day-by-day?

Would you rather serve in quiet obscurity or rule in a hell, worshiping your own ego?

Do you believe, even in moments of unbelief, that God's love and desire for you is stronger than your worst sin; that God longs to keep on cleansing you from all that separates you from Him?

Will you be like Mary, accepting his birth in your life, and will you be like Joseph, obediently protecting the gift of new, abundant, everlasting life from all tyrants—including yourself, who seek to kill Christ's life in you?

Jesus is at birth in you. Just as in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, the context for such life coming to us is always the context of death. This should not surprise us because this is precisely what he came for—bring God's own divine life into the darkness to change mortal death into divine life in everyone. He longs to be born in you and me. May it be so and may we nurture and protect what is given to us. Blessed Joseph, protector of the Christ child, pray for us.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.