

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Solemnity of The Epiphany (Year B) 7th January 2024

Today, in Jerusalem, Herod and the wise men meet. They exemplify very clearly two different approaches to Christ. The wise men are pagans, but they are open-minded seekers after truth all the same; Herod is Jewish, but his mind is closed. As the story unfolds they are all looking for Jesus: the wise men are looking for him because they have become captivated by his star; they are restless seekers after the truth and they cannot stop themselves from searching for it, even if the search takes them on a difficult and dangerous journey into unfamiliar lands. But as the wise men seek Jesus to worship him, Herod seeks Jesus to destroy him.

The threat from Herod is very serious, and very severe. We should not underestimate the lengths he will go to in order to protect his kingdom. We know he will order the slaughter of the innocents, but by this stage he has already had three of his own sons murdered because they seemed like a threat to him. He is a man of extraordinary violence, and extraordinary insecurity.

Herod is so busy worrying about where Jesus might be, that he misses something important in what the wise men say. They ask him: 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?' They don't ask Herod where the pretender to the throne is, or where the heir to the throne is. They ask him where the one who was born King of the Jews is. If Herod had really been listening, he would have realised it is already too late. His kingdom, such as it is for a puppet ruler in the pocket of the Romans, is gone already; he cannot save it.

The great reality that Herod fails to see is that, in truth, Jesus is no threat to his kingdom. Jesus comes to reign in a kingdom of holiness, grace, justice, love and peace (Preface for Christ the King). So, if Herod was a wise and just ruler, if he were a ruler after the Lord's own heart, he would already be ruling with justice love and peace, and the Lord would be no threat to him. If he were ruling well, the Kingdom of God would be a guarantor of his reign, not a threat to it. The truth is that Jesus is no threat to the kingdom itself, but he is a very serious threat to Herod's narcissistic abuse of that kingdom, his milking it for his own benefit and using it as a tool of repression.

Herod has a choice: he can rule wisely, humbly and well, taking pride only in his obedience to God and his fidelity to his high calling; or he can rule in a way that is selfish and dissolute. It's a big decision to make: if he chooses the former, Jesus will be no threat, in fact quite the opposite; but if Herod chooses to rule in the latter way, he is doomed. He is doomed to expending ever more energy on bolstering up his delusions of grandeur; he is doomed to be for ever looking over his shoulder, paranoid at the insecurity of his position; he is doomed to be feared rather than loved, and despised rather than respected; he is doomed to bring misery, suffering and death to the people around him, and to be caught in that double bind that dooms every unstable and violent ruler - everyone around him who is competent and able is seen as a potential threat to be disposed of, so he can only trust the fools.

The tragedy of Herod is that he is so worried about protecting his little kingdom (or, more precisely, his own way of governing that little kingdom) that he fails to see the Kingdom of God, so much greater and so much more beautiful, that is laid out before him. He becomes a tragic prisoner of his own ego.

Herod and the wise men close the Christmas season for us with a bleak contrast. There are the wise men, open-hearted and open-minded, who catch a glimpse of something new and find great joy in it; and there is Herod, with a heart that is hard and a mind that is closed - he also sees something new and instead of finding joy in it is so disturbed by it that he tries to destroy it. They typify two extremes in how people approach the person of Christ. He is always new and challenging, but whereas the mature, the wise and the open find joy and wonder in that newness, the insecure and self-obsessed find a threat. Few people are as wise as the men or as bad as Herod; we position ourselves somewhere on the spectrum in between, and probably our place varies and fluctuates over time. but we shouldn't let ourselves be lulled into a false sense of security by Herod's absence from our Christmas crib. The wise men are there, and we feel delighted to share in their delight, but their reverse is lurking in the background. We are not immune to his self-deceptive ways, to propping up our own way of doing things, whatever the cost to others, to swallowing our own self-delusion.

If only Herod, so scared that Jesus might take from him some of the power that he so loved, could have heard the words Pope Benedict spoke as he began his ministry as Pope:

'If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation.'