

## Bennoch church 18th December 2016

I want to take a moment this morning to think about the role of Herod in the birth story of Jesus. In Matthew chapter two we tend focus on the Magi and their visit to Bethlehem, following ancient prophecy and the wonder of a new star. But Herod is the 'dark side' of the Christmas event. This is 'black ops'. It is a story of interrogation, deception and violence. You do what you need to do, no matter the consequences and you call it patriotism. It is a story that rings with a certain truth about humanity. That those who hold the power, often exercise it with only one intention. To secure their own position. Ironically, they act, not out of strength, but out of a weakness, that contains no compassion for the vulnerable, nor justice for the innocent. It is today's Aleppo. It is today's Yemen. It is a side of Christmas, hidden deep in the shadows of one man's heart. For Herod, there could be no rival to his kingship. This is not about theology. It is all about politics. This not about worship. It is about power.

Let's set aside the Magi and ask, who was this guy Herod? Herod was raised as a Jew. His family had converted to Judaism, so his religious commitment was questioned by some elements of Jewish society. He was not accepted as a full Jew. He got himself up the 'greasy pole', by political maneuvering, and he was unexpectedly appointed 'King of the Jews' by the Roman Senate.

He was in effect a 'puppet king'. Actually he was king of no state at all, but he was expected to support the interests of Rome. But after a military victory by Rome over the Jewish state, Herod took the role sole ruler of Judea and the title of, "king" Herod, and he ruled for 37 years.

Matthew introduces him to us like this, *"Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judaea, during the time when Herod was king"*. (Matthew 2:1) This sets the historical context for the birth of Jesus. Herod died in 4 BC, so the birth of Jesus, had to be before that. Jesus was born into an occupied land, ruled by one of his own. A man of brutality, who was guilty of killing his wife and two of his sons ( a reported comment of the time, possibly fictitious was, *"better to be one of Herod's pigs than his son"*) and he gave orders, what became known as, the "massacre of the innocents".

There are no contemporary sources that refers to the massacre, but unlike Aleppo, Bethlehem was just a small village, and the number of male children under the age of two might not have exceeded 20, inhumane, but not news worthy. However, it is entirely possible that that this event actually happed, for the killings are wholly in keeping with the kind of person Herod was.

Matthew tells that Herod is alerted to the possible birth of a new king, by the questions of the Magi. *"Where is the baby born*

*to be king of the Jews?"* (Matthew 2: 2) That got his attention. What's this, king of the Jews, it that not me? As you might imagine, he is a little upset about this news, and if your dictator is upset, so are you! You are worried. He pulls in the religious establishment and demands an answer. Guys, help me out here. Where will the Messiah be born. No pressure! If you are in a tight spot, quote a verse from the bible, and luckily for them, they had one that fitted their predicament exactly. *"In the town of Bethlehem in Judaea...For this is what the prophet wrote. "*

The politburo has met and now we move into espionage. A secret meeting takes place. No doubt Herod's inner cabinet and advisors are present. Information is gleaned. Instructions are given and lies are peddled. Herod had only one intention and it was not to offer worship to any new born king. I wonder if the Magi were aware of the plot?

He is is tricked. For after visiting the Christ child in Bethlehem, the Magi are warned not to go back to Herod, and he is furious. His plan has failed. In his eyes, the imposter is still alive. It is time to move to plan two. If you can't kill one, kill them all. If you want to end a siege, kill the innocents. Note that time seems to have moved on. The birth of Jesus has come and gone, sometime in the past two years, or so, and as a family they now live as refugees in Egypt.

This is the 'under belly' of the Christmas story. The bit we don't talk about. Yes, prophecies have to be fulfilled, that is

important, but, it is all turning a bit nasty. Jesus survives, as you might remember Moses did. We have to assume, many children didn't. Parents who will no doubt ask, why has this happened to my child. What have they done to deserve this? Like Rachael in the Old testament, people wept for their children.

In the nativity story. Birth sits alongside death. In life it has always been so and ever will be. Jesus was born amidst the cries of loss, pain, and despair. God's incarnation was messy. Very messy.

If we believe, that God intervened in the world once and for all, then into a messy world, is born today's Christ child, amidst the cries of the women of Syria and Yemen. The ongoing '*massacre of the innocents*'.

In all of this, what do we hold onto? We hold onto what makes prophecy real, and that is hope in the midst of despair. That beyond the birth of a child, is *Immanuel*, God with us. That beyond the visit of the Magi, is the light of the world that shines into our darkest places. That beyond the greatest of human tragedies, there can still be new life, new possibilities. New hope.

I wonder if you would agree? God did not make the birth of Jesus easy. In a bombed out flat, in Aleppo, the Christ child, is born, even today. Amen.