

Jesus at birth in us

The 2nd Sunday after Christmas: Matthew 2:13-23
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In a very important way, Christmas is the mirror image of Easter. Consider this from a worship point of view. In Holy Week we begin with the ironic and sad events of Palm Sunday; Jesus enters Jerusalem hailed as King, and his enemies begin their final preparations for his undoing. On Maundy Thursday we commemorate the last, sad night of his earthly life; on Good Friday we witness through Liturgy Jesus' hideous torture and gruesome death. Then, at the Great Vigil of Easter we proclaim his glorious Resurrection – God's Light comes into the darkness and we rejoice.

In contrast Christmas begins with so much promise and joy: the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled, the child is born and earth and heaven rejoice. Yet before Christmastide is completed rebellion, violence and death come calling. It is not just the angels, shepherds and magi who are interested in seeing Jesus so, too, is Herod. We can so easily sentimentalize Jesus' birth; we can make his birth like a Disneyworld attraction – polished, quaint, sweet and inoffensive.

Unlike a Disneyworld Gospel, the cycle of stories surrounding Jesus' birth in Matthew's Gospel includes the horrific and unthinkable. Learning of the Magi's disobedience to Herod's scheme of murder, he flies into a murderous rage, ordering infanticide for the entire village of Bethlehem. Like tyrants before and after him, Herod slaughters innocent children 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 might thereby be aroused. A man like Herod, who killed a number of his own sons and other relatives, would not hesitate to kill the sons of others.

The story of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt and the reason for their quick departure testifies that Jesus' birth evokes hostility in those seeking to remain enthroned and will not bow down to anything other than themselves. Not all the world, then or now, welcomes God's presence in human affairs. Indeed, some days it seems that far more people are interested in their own sovereignty and 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? Although Herod and others like him are the extreme manifestation of resistance to God's rule, they ought not be dismissed merely because they are a logical extension of milder forms of resistance to the sovereignty of God. As theologian Frederick Dale Bruner writes: *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 the Christ's birth in diametrically opposed ways. Herod is a megalomaniacal mass murderer; Joseph stands as one who submits to God, who 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 to God's leading as God unfolds His will for Jesus, his Mother and for Joseph himself. Joseph listens to the revelation, accepts God's desires for their lives, and steps out boldly on the path he is to walk with his family.

Yet, let's be clear about one thing: Herod was not crazy. Ironically, it is Herod who grasps what is at stake in the birth of Jesus. Where the Magi were drawn to Jesus by wonder, and where Joseph acts in faithful obedience, Herod understands that if Jesus is Lord, then he is not. Herod at the very least grasped the political implications for his own power and authority. He stands in a long tradition of despotism that will not hesitate to eliminate any perceived threat, innocent or otherwise, to his power.

Let us also be clear about this: sensationalizing Herod and his behavior is not the Gospel's point. Normal, average human beings – like you and me – may not rule a geographical kingdom, 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 demeanor, corrupt with a bit of gossip.

It is simple to find out to what extent you share Herod's delusions of authority and sovereignty:

- Are you the lord of your own life, or do you daily vow your life to the Holy and Glorious Trinity?
- When making decisions of any import, large or small, for your life and that of your family do you rely on your own wits alone, or do you submit the question in prayer to God?
- Do you seek to pattern your life after what is clearly God's will as revealed in Scripture and the Church's teaching on Scripture, 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, mold you, transform you more into a person who will glorify Christ Jesus and serve others in His Holy Name, or do you consider yourself fine just the way you are?
- Are you giving your life – triumphs and sins; words, deeds and thoughts; failures and goodness – to God day-by-day, day-by-day, day-by-day?
- Would you rather serve in the Kingdom of God – being part of Christ's Holy Church – or would you rather rule in hell – being separated from everyone except your own ego?
- Do you believe, even in those 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, from all actions – even your own – that seek to do Christ's life in you violence, that wish to kill it?

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 – to bring God's own divine life into the darkness to change mortal death into divine being. This is also why He longs to be born in you and me. May it be so, and may we all protect what is given to us. Amen.