

## EPIPHANY

7 JANUARY 2024

Isaiah 60. 1-6

Psalm 72. 1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3. 1-12

Matthew 2. 1-12

I don't think I really appreciated the violence of the rule of Herod the Great and his descendants until this Christmas. In my Christmas Day sermon I referred to a piece on the ABC's Religion and Ethics page by Prof. Phillip Jenkins where he unpacks the violent political climate into which Jesus was born.

We know that the King was Herod and that he was king, not because the Jewish people made him king, but because the occupying Roman empire made him monarch. Herod had killed multiple members of his own family, and in the year 4 BCE tried and had executed his son Antipater for alleged treason. He systematically wiped out all male claimants from the dynasty prior to his own.

When Herod the great died there was a popular push for a change to the way Palestine was governed and how people were taxed. But there was open rebellion, calling for change, and so Herod's son Archelaus oversaw the massacre of thousands, suspected of being opponents. During the reign of this family, anything was permitted, or a blind eye turned, in service of maintaining the Pax Romana – the peace of Rome

Many of the events which are recorded in our scriptures – both in the Hebrew scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – and the New Testament - we can be inclined to read as history. Because it is recorded as an event of some kind and it is recorded in writing we can read it as history – that it actually happened in this way. But the difficulty is that for many of these events which we might be inclined to regard as history there is no other independent record – apart from what is in the scriptures. So, we can't be entirely confident that these things happened in the way they are described in the scriptures.

And because the gospels in particular are first and foremost theological documents – not historical records - we need to be cautious in saying: well, this really did happen. In reading, our faith seeking understanding the point is to look beyond the events to what they might be saying about God, about Jesus, about the early church, about the human condition, about what it means to be disciples.

So, with this caution, what some might call scepticism, I have always read Matthew's massacre of the innocents with a grain of salt over recent years. Could anybody be so cruel as to order the murder of all the babies under two years of age around Bethlehem, I used to ask myself. I viewed it as a kind of literary exaggeration. But given this piece by Phillip Jenkins and the account of the fear-driven brutality of Herod, it's a quite likely possibility.

In the last weeks I have come to see Herod as a kind of Lukashenko – the puppet president of Belarus. He gets his legitimacy from Putin of Russia as Herod got his legitimacy from Rome. Lukashenko is able to act with impunity with terrible cruelty when it suits, because Putin will protect him and allows him this freedom in order that the old Soviet ways of doing business can be preserved. Herod got his legitimacy from the Caesars and as long as he maintained order, he could pretty much do as he liked. They had made him king. He was not king in the line of David, or any other esteemed Jewish line of inheritance; but that didn't matter to the Roman overlords.

So when the Magi come asking to know where the child who has been born king of the Jews is to be found – Herod is rightly frightened. Like Putin and Lukashenko, Herod will broach no one who will in any way threaten his power. Even a new-born child.

The Magi's innocent question opens up the possibility that the vision of justice and peace longed for by the Jewish people might come to be.

The prophet Isaiah gives voice to a hopefulness for a people caught in darkness:

For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.

and the Psalm we have read today gives voice to a longing for a reign of justice and peace – of a rule which is grounded in righteousness.

Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.

The last two years we have watched with horror as the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has taken place and now as Israel destroys Gaza. It seems that some in the Israeli government are intent in entirely razing Gaza and expelling the Palestinians. In Ukraine we see images of towns destroyed; schools, hospitals, villages, town halls flattened, of crops destroyed by fighting. In Gaza we see hundreds of thousands fleeing on foot and of the destruction of street upon street of peoples' homes.

... May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,

give deliverance to the needy,

At Epiphany we mark the revealing of the Christ to the gentiles – to the non-Jewish world. We mark the recognition that all of the world is called to the vision expressed in the vision of order and peace inherited in the creation, in the vision of the prophets for prosperity, for righteousness, for peace, for justice, and we mark the revealing of the vision of God for all in the coming of God into the world in the Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed one.

We rejoice in this vision. We order our lives by it, we seek to embody it in our living, in our values, in our priorities, in our relationships, in how we order our finances. We pay homage to this one who has embodied the life and vision of God so fully and we set our lives by the star of his way and follow in this way.

We pray today for ourselves, for the courage to live in this way. We especially pray for the church, for those disciples who find themselves in places of deep conflict and destruction, around the world; where the powers of the time create disorder and chaos and destruction that the reign of God may come for them and that they may dwell in peace and justice, enjoying the righteousness of God and God's way.

Andrew Boyle