

The Feast of the Epiphany 2025

Readings: Isaiah 60.1-6, Psalm 72.[1-9]10-15, Ephesians 3.1-12, Matthew 2.1-12

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

One description in today's Gospel is incongruous meaning it doesn't quite fit at least at first glance. It is when we are told in Matthew's gospel that King Herod was afraid. "When King Herod heard this [that the king of the Jews had been born], he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ..." The Herod referred to is known as King Herod the Great, one, to help distinguish him from other kings with the same name, but also two, because he was indeed great. I will explain.

Herod is a fascinating character who ruled Judea from 37 BC to 4 AD. He was half-Jewish. His grandfather being a forced Idumean convert to the Jewish faith and his mother Nabatean. Educated in Rome he ruled as a client king on Rome's behalf. When he died his kingdom was divided among his sons, who would rule on behalf of Rome. This became necessary one assumes because King Herod had become too powerful in the eyes of Rome, therefore it was better to employ the time honoured principle of divide and rule. Judea very soon came under direct Roman rule and was renamed Palaestina, Syria Palaestina to be precise. The name change favouring a geographical designation over the ethnic one of Judea, the land of the Jews. The region we today call Palestine.

Herod the Great became one of the greatest builders of antiquity. He is best known for rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem on a grand scale. Of the Temple Jesus says of himself, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here." (Matthew 12.6) Although the Temple was razed to the ground by the Romans the platform on which the Temple stood remains. It is an enduring as well as imposing structure. René Benko, the failed Austrian property tycoon will be a footnote in history, while Herod the Great's star will shine for centuries for his architectural achievements.

The greatest of these achievements was the construction of an imperial harbour at Caesarea Maritima north of Joppa. It was in Caesarea Maritima that the first gentile and his household were baptised. (Acts 10 & 11) To fully appreciate this achievement it is helpful to note that along that particular stretch of the Eastern Mediterranean coastline there are very few natural harbours. We were reminded of this recently when US troops built a floating pier to land goods for the suffering people of Gaza. It was abandoned due to the violence of the sea and the cost of maintaining it. Some of Herod's other building achievements are the Herodion, where King Herod was buried, Masada, a winter palace on the Dead Sea and rebuild of Machaerus, where John the Baptist by order of Herod Antipas was beheaded. All this juxtaposed against a frightened potentate.

The Greek word translated as frightened in today's gospel describes Herod's reaction to the Magi's announcement the king of the Jews has been born. In earlier English translations it was more commonly translated as troubled as in, "When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." In other places the Greek word is also translated as troubled and even on some occasions as terrified. Both being troubled and terrified include the notion of fear, but the fear here is of another dimension. It cuts to the bone. It is tangible. It manifests itself. It is not covered up. The fear that King Herod exhibits is of such magnitude that it troubles, even terrifies.

We have left Advent well behind us, but as most will know Advent in former times included a call by the Church to consider the Four Last Things as the remembrance of Christ's birth drew nigh: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. They were meant to trouble, to terrify, to put the fear of God in the believer, but also to assure that he or she might make amends while there is yet time (Memento mori in other words – a reminder of our mortality.) and two to remind the believer of what God through his Beloved, Christ, out of Love accomplished at a price that Christmas be celebrated with happiness, merriment and joy, but also appropriately.

The birth of the Messiah, the king of the Jews, is not something Herod welcomes. Why, it questions his legitimacy to the throne. What a scene! The magi come to King Herod and inform him a king that the king of the Jews has been born and in doing so they unwittingly question Herod's claim to kingship... at least over the Jews. Additionally there is some evidence that Herod understood himself as a Messiah type figure having rebuilt the Temple and having ushered in a time of peace.

Should we have any interest in history we know it is extremely important to kings, despots and even elected leaders to show and prove their credentials and underline their legitimacy to the throne. King Herod's reign is accompanied by the ever present (often unspoken) swinging of uncertainty about his legitimacy. As someone raised in the Jewish faith knowing not only the instability of Jewish rule across prior centuries, but also that God will send a ruler, his anointed one, to rule with equity, peace and justice, virtues King Herod is not known for makes him uneasy.

It is also remarkable not only that King Herod is the Frightened One, The Troubled One, The Terrified, but **all Jerusalem with him** are frightened, troubled and terrified. The king who has been born, this promised king is to rule "my people Israel", he is to judge "my people Israel" as God says. This 'all Jerusalem' knows with him is a collective. The king and the people with him are unprepared. John the Baptist underlines this,

"And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:10)

The "with him" in the phrase "and all Jerusalem with him" should not be overlooked as it refers to the close connection there always is between those who rule and those who assist them often identifying with them. Their place in the earthly kingdom is dependent on King Herod and their proximity to him. Their unique place of authority is dependent on closeness to those in power. Little has changed across the centuries. Presently, at least for a time the centre of gravity is not Washington, but a resort in Miami known as Mar a Lago (sea to lake). The "with him" in today's gospel reminds us that there are nuances that only a close reading of the Bible will reveal.

The contrast between the reaction of King Herod and all Jerusalem 'with him' with that of the Magi is marked. It is a contrast we have worked hard to establish above. Matthew affirms the contrast when he records the Magi saying, "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." On seeing the rising star, the light of the nations the Magi make their way following the arch of the star westwards arriving in Jerusalem. Even though the Magi are of a different ethnicity they know the Jewish prophecies. They are learned persons. They are wise persons. It is they who welcome the birth of the king of the Jews, even though they are from outside the fold not being Jewish. They recognise this is a king who comes for all people. A king desirous to draw all to himself as stated in John's gospel, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all [men] unto me." (John 12:32)

In the Tradition the three gifts of gold, incense and myrrh come to mean there are three Magi, which in turn is employed to underline the point that Christ comes for all the nations represented by the three continents known at the time: Africa, Asia and Europe. It is for this reason that one of the Magi in our cribs should be from sub Saharan Africa. Again the three figures in our cribs should also show different ages one being young, standing upright, another middle aged, bending slightly and the third one old, kneeling. The posture of the figures is not accidental but given to represent a movement from a slight dependence on God to complete dependence on God, from slightly being inclined to God to being utterly reverent before God. The three gifts represent Christ's divine status (incense), sovereignty (gold), and his redemptive suffering (myrrh), its bitter perfume.

The Magi preface their remarks stating as a matter of fact that the king of the Jews has been born. As we heard King Herod is not slow to react. He bids the scribes to ascertain where the king is to be born, but it fact he has been born. The chief priests and scribes of the people provide the answer, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet..."

Not only do the Magi make their way immediately on a long journey, but they also do so without being afraid, terrified or troubled. They desire to do the right thing. They desire to

pay homage. They want to give worth to this king through their worship, their homage. They bring precious gifts showing the accustomed generosity of Near and Middle Eastern cultures, which endures to this day.

In drawing to a close, referencing a point I made above, it is my great privilege as a priest to hear and come to know of men and women who despite being from other cultures permeated by other religions, often Islam, who are ready and willing to come to Jesus as the Magi did then. "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

We in the West, in contrast to the Magi and the men and women who despite coming from a different religion and culture are encumbered. Our culture has lost its ability to see the rising star in the East. It is encumbered by scepticism, secularism, hocus-pocus, the cult of self with a strong and growing narcissistic streak, a false dichotomy between science and religion, by Christian institutional failure and our grievous sins, by the taming of the Gospel, by materialism, by loneliness, by a culture confused about the gift of life, by superstition, by... but even the against that background people are finding their way to Jesus. Recently some 11,00 young adults gathered for prayer and exchange in Augsburg.

Today we have gathered and with the Magi to kneel in homage with them before the child who in a manger lies because we too have seen his star rising.

This is the wood of the crib in which was laid the Saviour of the world!

**Come let us worship!**