

The Dark Side of Christmas

Matthew 2:16 "Herod...flew into a rage, and gave orders for the massacre of all the boys aged two years or under, in Bethlehem."

There are so many dispiriting stories of children in our world abandoned or used shamefully. We hear of children on the news who are sons and daughters of Aids parents left without a home. What frightens me as much as seeing these unloved children left alone, and in despair, is the fact that we are so used to stories like this in these days that we express very little more than a momentary sorrow. We have gotten so used to the stories of such harsh unfeeling lives that we are pained for the moment and then pass on to the next item of news.

This might explain something about the reality of this story about Herod and his reaction to the birth of the child Jesus in Bethlehem. The simple fact is that there is no historical record of the massacre of children in Herod's reign which would correspond to the story that Matthew tells us. But what is true is that Herod was such a malignant king, for whom no atrocity was evil enough, that just as we pass over the evils around us today with silent sorrow, so it was in the days when Jesus was born. Herod murdered family, friends, any person who threatened him as King and the death of a few children would pass as unnoticed as the death of some children on a street corner in Sebronica. The dark side of this story is as much in this passing over of the horrors of life as it is in the death of the children themselves.

But what is most significant about this story lies in the fact that Matthew includes it as a part of his Christmas story. Why does Matthew tell this story as a part of the wonder and glory of the story that has been the center of our celebrations these last days? Matthew is reminding us that there is a dark side to the Christmas story – a dark side that it is well for us to take note of.

The dark side of Christmas lies in our difficulty in accepting the reality of the birth. In Matthew's telling of the story King Herod was afraid of the coming of the one whom he thought would possibly be a threat to him. So the good news of the Angels to the shepherds as they sat on the mountainside looking after their flocks came as inauspicious news to King Herod walled up inside his beautiful palace with the comforts and troubles of power.

The question that this part of the story forces us to ask ourselves, quite honestly, is are we like those shepherds and the regal Magi who look forward to the coming of one who would change the very nature of life for them, or are we in our way like King Herod afraid that the changes that come with this new being into the world will be too much for us and will usurp the power and possessions that we have?

This darkness that is a part of the Matthean Christmas story links us so clearly with the biblical story of God's dealings with human beings. We can find in it echoes of the story of the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve's rebellion when they were faced with a limit that God had placed upon them. Their refusal to accept that they were not God ended in their expulsion from the very presence of God. Their disobedience lay in their desire to be Gods and they were not willing to let God be God. They wanted to live lives with all of God's powers. The purity of the Garden was contaminated by the desires of the human couple to achieve total power over their new domain. Without the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge they lacked the one thing that would give them that power. Matthew reminds us in this dark story that we, like Adam and Eve, always want that little more power.

This Story of Herod's rejection of the child Jesus also echoes the story of the Hebrew peoples themselves for their story is one of one rejection of the covenant after another. The prophets believed that the Exile of the people to Babylon was a result of the constant rejection of their God in order to establish for themselves a home which they could control with arms and political chicanery. Jeremiah saw in the coming troubles the result of their rejection of God and he portrays this with the image that Matthew picks up in relating this story of the massacre of the children. "In Ramah was heard a voice sobbing in bitter grief, it was Rachel weeping for her children." It was Rachel, Jacob's wife, crying for those who had been lost through the infidelity of her people.

The darkness at the heart of Christmas lies within ourselves. That is the message of this story of Herod's anger and rage. While the Magi came with gifts because they saw a future filled with a new hope and with redeeming love, all that Herod could see was a potential rival to his own power. In a little child he could see not promise and hope, but one who would threaten his power. So, while the Magi brought gifts, Herod strove to get rid of the child born in circumstances so different from King Herod's palace. He was born in a stable of love, while Herod lived in a palace of hate and fear.

What was King Herod really afraid of? He was the King and could call on the awesome power of Rome if needed. Why be afraid of a child? Especially how could he be afraid of a child born out in the middle of nowhere and in the meanness of a bare stable? Any threat to his power, however farfetched it might seem to us was a reality to someone whose whole life was centered on that kingly power. The threat of the promise of the child's birth was a threat to who Herod was – it was a threat to his identity. The very essence of his life was bound up in the royal symbols that surrounded him. Like ourselves, he found his inner strength from the importance of his status. We find meaning from who we are, what we do, how other people recognize us. We place a great deal of importance upon this self image for it gives us the meaning that makes life possible and meaningful. Strip away our persona and we are left with nothing. We are afraid of any challenge to that precarious palace that we have build to surround our lives. Now God does challenge us when we think that we are safe and happy in our enclosed self-satisfied being, for his very presence is as much as a threat as was the presence of the Tree of Knowledge to Adam and Eve. We are afraid of losing our status as self-made kings and queens of our own domain. Herod was afraid of losing himself.

The loss of control over his world that Herod feared is our problem too. We are afraid that what God's presence in our world might herald is that we too lose our power of control. We love to hold everything in our hands placing the center of our world in our own desires and wishes. We find it difficult to say: "Thy will be done, not mine." That statement of Christ upon the Cross is one of the most stunning statements in the Gospels. Christ, the Son of God, giving up his will, "Let Thy Will be done." That is something that Herod could never do, and it is something that we find very difficult to do. It means giving up ourselves into the hands of someone "other."

Of course there might be one other fear that gripped Herod – in losing his power he might lose his possessions – that precious palace of his with his gold and silver. Like Herod we too often allow our possessions to define who we are. What we own is what gives us reason for being. In our better moments we recognize the truth of this and are uneasy with our possessions. We admire someone like Mother Theresa because she gave all of herself to others, and with a vow of poverty placed herself at the mercy of the charity of others. Again, the problem is that we fear losing something of ourselves. Our life if given to God means that we have to place our identity in the hands of God so that it is His will that is done, not ours.

There is, Matthew tells us in this story, a darkness that is present at Christmas. The real darkness of Christmas is the Cross itself. The Christ Child becomes the Jesus who was crucified. We like Peter abandon the Christ because he asks too much of us – he asks us to lose ourselves in Him, and that is a loss that is too hard to bear. How hard it is to abandon all those tricks we have which enable us to live each day in a world that seems to demand so much from us. How hard it is for us to find ourselves by giving up all that we treasure and which seem to make life meaningful for us. And the Christ who preaches mercy and love is abandoned on a cross.

This is Matthew's insight in bringing this story into the Christmas Story. This is why there is darkness even in this season of lights and joy. The Angels' cry is not always understood to be good news of great joy to all, even though it is meant to be such for all mankind. The message of the Angels there forces us to ask of ourselves whether we are prepared to hear the good news. The Good News is the news about who we really are, and what we could be. The darkness lies in our reluctance to accept that news. We must, like the shepherds of old, come with simplicity and without pretension to the one who brings us back to our creator – God himself. It means that we, like the Magi of old, come searching for the promise of a new world, a world of promise and hope, a world which will transcend our own puny efforts of creation.

It is difficult for us to do this, to give up status, power and possessions, to offer only ourselves to this child. Yet finally that is the message of the tiny child in the rude crib. To turn away from the presence of God in the stable, in the garden, in our lives is to condemn ourselves to a life of callousness. It is a life in which we

can be indifferent to the cruelties of the world, a life in which others can be passed by without any concern, a life in which we reach for the control of time and the world itself. But that is Herod's way. Matthew's challenge to us is whether it will be Herod's way or the way of the Christ child that we will take saying with him: "Thy Will be done, not mine." The darkness of Christmas can be overcome by our own presence before the child in the stable, asking him to accept us for what we are, and then giving him the power over our lives. "Thy will be done, O Lord, not mine."

John S. Morris, January 2010