

THE CHOICE

It is always amazing to me to hear the conversations that buzz about at this time of year, between Christmas and New Year's. "Well, Christmas is over," I hear folk say. In many ways, in many phrases, it crops up in normal conversations. People mean no harm. They are not thinking theologically. They are just talking and commenting about schedules, seasons changing, and what they are facing next. It is nevertheless a strange thing that Christians could even mouth the words without choking. Christmas is over? What an extraordinary thing to say! If we have any concept whatsoever of the meaning and proclamation of Christmas, how could we imagine that it would *ever* be over? What would it take to close down the coming of the Christ, to stop it, to put it to an end? Satan has been trying with might and main for two thousand years – and he gets some assistance from us, from time to time, to be sure. But closing down Christmas is a tall order. Once the cat is out of the bag, how do we get it back in? Once God reveals himself, how do we pretend to not know? Christmas is always coming, but it is never over.

So we can take down the decorations, but how do we get Christmas – *Immanuel*, God with us – out of our minds and hearts? Christmas is always coming, and once we awaken to it, it is never going away – not ever again. Even though life moves on, and seasons come and go, and shortly we won't be singing the carols again for a while (just so they will be fresh for new impact next December), still the true reality of God with us, God in our lives, Jesus as our leader and redeemer ... where would it go?

What really happens each year is that we get confronted with carrying Christmas truth into the realities of normal life, and into a mundane world where a truly great many people have never known Christmas. Once the presents are all opened and the lights come down, they think it's over because they never awakened on the inside to what the celebrating was really about. That makes us feel a little weird at times – a little out of step with what's going on around us – because we are carrying Christmas truth for the rest of our lives, trying to live by it, and live it out, every day – while most of the world around us thinks it's just a holiday: four weeks of glitter, and then gone.

What are the wise men doing as they head back home? Are they saying, “Hey, it’s over. The baby wasn’t really born; it was just a pageant, a crèche scene”? Not hardly. On the other hand, the star is gone. They have the problem of eluding Herod, and if you know anything about Herod, you know that is not going to be easy. And nobody is writing musicals or stories or plays about the return journey of the wise men. Back to the same old unglorious grind – only now you carry glory with you.

We spent most of December on the first part of Matthew’s story. While it is still fresh in our minds, let us at least glance at the second half. With the departure of the wise men, we get some very ugly things happening. Herod is in a rage because the wise men never report back to him. And we are told about the flight into Egypt; the killing of the babies; the careful return to Nazareth, after Herod’s death, because Herod’s son Archelaus has all of his father’s bad qualities and none of his genius. This is part of Christmas too, my dear friends. The world is a hard, cruel, mean place, sometimes even when it doesn’t at all intend to be. If it weren’t so, Messiah would never have come! People die or they are murdered, raped, ripped off, hurt, or maimed in endless ways, inside and out – on and all around Christmas. We all know that life is treacherous and uncertain; we just don’t like to think about it. We are afraid it will ruin Christmas. Only, it doesn’t ruin Christmas. It reminds us of why Christmas is necessary – of why He came in the first place. What ruins Christmas is keeping it out of real life, pretending it’s all fun and fantasy, and not letting it in to the full spectrum of our hearts and lives.

So we are not out of chapter two. We have hardly even taken a breath in the telling of the story. The horrid reaction of Herod is just as much a part of Christmas as the wondrous gifts of the magi. At least that is how Matthew tells it, and he is telling it just as true as he knows how.

So here we go, with one more look at Matthew’s story before we get to January. With the departure of the wise men, we are left to contemplate the strange comparison and contrast between two kings. One is a baby, proclaimed a universal and spiritual king by the wise men and their gifts. The other is a king in what we usually call “the real world.” What the story proclaims – screams really, at the top of its voice – is that everybody has to choose between these two kings. Of course, a lot of us are eager, even determined, to stay neutral, to stay aloof from this choice. But the story does not think that is possible. Neither does Jesus. *“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with*

me – scatters.” (Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23) But let’s not jump the gun. Many people in our time know little about Jesus except for hearsay, and they know nothing at all about Herod. That makes the choice a bit nebulous.

Herod the Great was nearly seventy years old when Jesus was born. His thirty-four-year reign was about to end, with his death. He was a supreme politician, somehow managing to keep favor with Rome throughout the intrigue and the rise and fall of three Emperors, all of whom he knew personally. Herod was more popular in Rome than he was in Jerusalem, and his behavior matched the flavor and corruption of the courts of the Roman Empire of his time. He was ruthless (you remember the story of Ruth – the companion, the compassionate – well, Herod was ruthless), killing his father, sons, wives, friends, priests, members of the Sanhedrin, and anybody else who displeased him or whom he suspected or imagined might threaten his power or position.

On the other hand, Herod brought prosperity and order to Israel, where before there had been poverty and chaos. Like many heads of households, companies, and states we have known, Herod could take pride in the things he provided and the way he took responsibility for the benefit of those under his rule. He was an excellent and courageous warrior, as well as a good general. Palestine was not handed to him on a silver platter; he won it by taking strong initiative, by military might, and by shrewd negotiations. He was the greatest king since David, and his life was a cross between Robin Hood, King Arthur, and Bluebeard the Pirate.

Let me give you some background: Herod came from Idumea (Edom), southeast of the Dead Sea. You remember – that’s where Ishmael and Esau went. In the breakup of the Hasmonean Dynasty, Herod’s father managed to get Herod appointed as Governor of Galilee. Then the Parthians invaded during the chaos following the death of Julius Caesar. Herod – by cunning, daring, and the luck of the Scarlet Pimpernel – managed to elude the Parthian soldiers, escape into Egypt, elude Cleopatra’s soldiers, and take ship, in wintertime no less, to Rome. Once there, he managed to gain a hearing before Octavius and Anthony, themselves rivals for the throne of Rome, and win from them a promise of support once their own affairs were settled.

On the strength of that future promise, Herod returned to Palestine, rallied an army, and fought his way through the land, eventually capturing even Jerusalem. Then dancing between Anthony and Octavius

while they fought each other, Herod retained the support of Octavius Augustus Caesar as he came to total power, and Herod was a loyal supporter for the rest of his life.

Herod was arguably the greatest king since David. He ruled the same territory David had ruled, maybe even slightly more. He was responsible for the greatest building boom, and the greatest increase in trade and commerce in Israel since the days of King Solomon. He built Caesarea; he rebuilt Samaria (and called it “Sebaste,” the Greek translation of “Augustus,” in honor of the Emperor); he rebuilt the temple and the palace in Jerusalem; he built and repaired roads, aqueducts, theaters, stadiums – the list is endless.

Herod was Jewish in name only. He was a totally secular man, Hellenistic in his vision for Israel. He had no interest in anything beyond the material, physical plane – and the power he could gain. But he cared about his kingdom and the prosperity of his people. In the great famine of 25 B.C., Herod put his enormous energy toward saving his people, and he spent his own money as well as his nation’s resources to bring food from Egypt to keep his people fed.

Of course, there is more than one reason for feeding the hungry. Herod was shrewd enough and far-seeing enough to know that if the people were weak, the king was weak – a piece of logic that has escaped many leaders in all walks of life since the dawn of time. In any case, the other side of all this was that Herod revealed no shred of conscience – no accountability to a Higher Power. He was completely practical, efficient, and realistic. “Right” is whatever works – from your own perspective – in the here and now. Slaves died by the thousands on Herod’s building projects. He killed anybody and everybody who might have become a political threat. He makes Machievelli’s Prince seem like a saint.

His favorite wife was Mariamne (I). But she was the heiress of the former Hasmonean dynasty and, as such, she and her offspring were potential contenders for Herod’s throne. In case anyone was planning a coup, Herod ended up killing Mariamne (29 B.C.), whom he mourned for the rest of his life. He also killed her grandfather, her brother (Aristobulus), and his two sons by her (Alexander and Aristobulus, 7 B.C.). He ordered the execution of a third son (Antipater, named after Herod’s father) just five days before his own death. (Kill a son to rule for five more days? That’s real paranoia!) Herod would have loved our slogans: “Go for the gusto.” “Be all you can be.” “God helps those who help themselves.” He had no esteem for God, but he had a lot of self-esteem.

Herod was king of the Jews, but in no way was he a Jewish king. Jewish kings knew that God was the only true King.

My father was a probation officer for the County of Los Angeles until he could no longer stand it. As such, he was in and around the courts, and in fact his offices were in the same building with the courts. One day he came home with a story about a long and tedious trial in which a man had been accused of a sordid and cruel crime. When the jury was ready with its verdict, the foreman stood and delivered a verdict of not guilty. The foreman went on to explain that they had found the man innocent because it had been proved to the jury's satisfaction that the man had not been present at the scene of the crime, and so he could not have done it. "But," continued the foreman, "after what we have learned, during the course of this trial, about this man and his character, this jury would like to state publicly that we are convinced, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that had this man been there, he would have done it."

Somehow, that gets me where it hurts. How many times have I been saved simply by lack of temptation or lack of opportunity? Is it that I have real character, or have I just been elsewhere? How can we live so that even God will know that if he puts us there, we will not do it? Or, even more importantly, that if he puts us there, we will do right, we will do justly, we will demonstrate the love of Him who sent us?

There is no record of Herod having killed the babies of Bethlehem. Strange, since Josephus loved to list Herod's crimes, yet somehow he missed this one. Strange that such a calamity would not have echoed throughout the records of the time. But the whole world knew that this was very like Herod – had he been there, he would have done it.

Well, Matthew, I believe, tells this Christmas story to highlight two kings: one a helpless child, and one a cruel tyrant. Matthew's world – Matthew's readers – know both what kind of King the baby Jesus had turned into and what sort of king Herod had been. And Matthew's story, at the end and at its apex, says: "Choose! Choose which kind of king you will serve. Choose your king ... because you become like that which you serve."

On the one hand, we have Herod the Great: A cruel and ruthless monarch – a man of the world, and worldly in every respect. All of his abilities and gifts, his incredible health and energy, and his brilliance had been devoted to gaining power in this world – to gaining, keeping, and expanding his kingdom here. And he did it, and did it incredibly

well. He had what he wanted, took what he wanted, lived in great luxury. (Some of you have vacation spots. Have you *seen* Masada? Herod had ten of them. He was buried in one of them, Herodium, just a few miles southeast of Bethlehem.) Herod had it all and he kept it all for thirty-four years, and nobody even came close to taking it away from him. They did not live long enough.

On the other hand, we have a helpless child, an angel, some wise men bearing gifts, a faithful peasant couple fleeing into Egypt. And *this* King would not kill you. Oh, He could. He had the power. But He would not. He would die for you first.

Matthew is asking: Whom will you choose? Whom will you bet your life on?

Of course, Matthew's readers already know that Herod Antipas (one of Herod's sons) killed John the Baptist and turned Jesus back over to Pilate, and that Jesus had indeed been crucified – all of it thirty-five to forty years before Matthew's story was written. But Matthew is still asking: Whom will you choose? The worldly king, or the heavenly child? The shrewd political realist, or the spiritual idealist?

But wait a minute. Which is the truly practical man? Do we really envy Herod? He had all the wine, women, song, and luxury that power and money could buy, but do we envy him? Much of our world still emulates Herod, as if we are hypnotized against seeing the end of his story – against seeing where it leads if we live like Herod lived.

Herod was working for a thirty-four-year reign. Jesus was – and is – building for eternity. If you believe in eternity, Herod is not very practical. If you believe in God, Herod is a total idiot. How would you have liked to have been Herod when he met God? Oh, I'm not talking about wrath; that would be easy, and just. What about looking into the face of God and seeing the tears and sorrow for all that you had done, and for what you had made with the life that he gave you?

The difference between Herod and Jesus is the difference between living for what you can acquire, or living for what you can become. And Matthew says, "You have a choice. Choose your king." That, also, is the story of Christmas.