

A Tale of Two Kings

Herod was born in the early 70's in Idumea, which is just south of Judea. His father was a high-ranking official under the local ruler and high priest in Judea. The family ancestors had converted to Judaism some time back and Herod was raised as a Jew. Herod became involved in politics from an early age as his father had a good relationship with Julius Caesar who trusted him to run things well in Judea. Herod was in his mid-to-late twenties when he was appointed the provincial governor of Galilee where he managed to rake in a healthy return in taxes to the Roman Senate - always regarded as a good thing by his superiors. He also managed to get rid of the menace of bandits from the Galilee and was highly regarded in Rome, although his brutality was not appreciated by the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin.

Around the year 40 B.C. some unexpected events pushed Herod into a position of power. There was a revolt led by a man named Antigonus and Herod fled to Rome to plead with them to restore the old leader of the Jews and to get rid of this usurper Antigonus. While he was there, the Roman Senate appointed him as King of the Jews. The man in charge for Rome at the time, Mark Antony, sent a large army to recapture Jerusalem and Herod became firmly established as King of the Jews.

To say that Herod was brutal or cut-throat would be, if anything, an understatement. In 35 B.C. he ordered the assassination of Aristobulus III, who was a member of the family that had led Judah during its years of independence before Pompey had come and conquered Palestine on behalf of Rome. When Herod heard that his own mother-in-law was plotting to regain a foothold for the Hasmonean family in the politics of Judea, he had him killed before he could meet with Mark Antony and Cleopatra. When Mark Antony lost his great power struggle with Octavian, who later became known as Caesar Augustus, Herod was able to convince Octavian of his loyalty and of his ability to keep Judea's borders open to Roman traders with Syria and Egypt. It was primarily Herod's loyalty to Rome that enabled him to continue in his position of power until his death.

Our major source for the life of Herod is the writing of Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote near the end of the first century. In his book The Jewish War, Josephus spoke of Herod's rule in mostly positive terms, but in another work, Jewish Antiquities, he portrays Herod as a tyrant. Herod was a despot; Aristobulus was not the only one to be killed because Herod feared him. He had his own secret police who listened in on the conversations of the people and reported anything that sounded like rebellion. He ordered the executions of his wife, mother-in-law and three of his sons. He kept a personal bodyguard of 2000 soldiers. It's safe to say that he was not well-liked by the Jewish population who had to pay for two of his expensive habits: building and gift-giving.

Herod undertook some sophisticated building projects, including using the latest technology in hydraulic cement in the underwater construction of a harbour at Caesarea. He built the fortresses at Masada and Herodium as well as new cities and a

new water supply for Jerusalem. But his main architectural triumph was the new Temple in Jerusalem which he built so that he would have “a capital city worthy of his dignity and grandeur.” One of Herod’s motivations for doing all this building was to win the favour of the Jewish people, who regarded him as an outsider and who found other reasons to mistrust and dislike him.

Herod also liked to give lavish gifts, especially to his superiors in Rome, as a way of letting them know that he was still their loyal supporter. The burden for the construction and gift-giving fell on the tax-payers of Judea and Galilee, which added to the resentment people felt towards him.

Perhaps the strongest emotional responses to Herod came when he erected a Roman eagle at the entrance to the Temple - clearly expressing a higher respect for Roman opinion than for the religious feelings of the Jews. When he died, somewhere between 4 and 1 B.C., there were outbreaks of anger and violence, riots took place in many cities, as pent-up resentments were released.

If you were to summarize Herod’s life, you would say that he was a successful politician, managing to gain and hold a position of authority within the greatest political power of the day, the Roman Empire. He was extremely paranoid and would order people to be executed that he had any suspicions about and that paranoia grew worse as he grew older. The killing of two of his sons and the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem came very near the end of his life. He wanted people to like him, at least enough that they would support his right to rule and so he took on expensive projects and gave expensive gifts to win favour, to influence people to be on his side.

That’s the way political power still works. Powerful leaders know who to be generous towards and it will inevitably include the leaders of the military. Look at how Robert Mugabe was able to retain power while he ruined the nation of Zimbabwe. He killed or drove out the white farmers and gave their land to those who would remain loyal to him. How has Venezuela kept a full-on civil war at bay when inflation is running at 1 million percent and most of the shelves in the stores are empty? Again, you treat well those who carry the guns and promise them more of the same.

As you can imagine, part of writing a sermon is writing out your thoughts, then deleting them, trying again to express the truth, finding you’re not doing it well, delete, delete, then trying again. In this section, I wrote out lots of examples of how political power works, how paranoid leaders do what others want them to do, just to get enough people on-side. Then I hit the delete button.

You will often hear a statement like, “The president of the United States is the most powerful person in the world”, but I doubt if that is remotely true. Way back in the 1940’s, there was an intense competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to recruit German scientists to help prepare for conflict and in the space race. The president at the time was Harry Truman and he sanctioned “Operation Paper-clip” which recruited 1600 German scientists, but he made one stipulation: no former

members of the Nazi party, or even its supporters, were to be included in the recruitment. The organization that was the forerunner of the CIA simply bypassed this requirement by scrubbing the records of those they recruited, eliminating any possibly incriminating evidence of war crimes from their records. In 1960, when President Dwight Eisenhower ordered the CIA to stop their U-2 spy flights over the Soviet Union, the CIA chief ignored him. Shortly after that, U-2 pilot Gary Powers was shot down over Soviet territory and plans for a summit meeting with Khrushchev ended. This is how power works and why there are very few people who are humble enough to be trusted with it.

Think about all the wonderful, heroic figures who Tolkien wrote about in The Lord of the Rings. None of them, whether Boromir of Gondor, or Gandalf the wizard, the great men or even the leaders of the elves, were able to carry that ring. It was dangerous for them because it represented power and they all could be seduced by power - and most of them knew it. But the humble hobbits, who thought less of themselves than others did, were able to carry the ring all the way to Mount Doom, although even they needed help to get rid of it in the end.

Herod was, in many ways, a capable leader. He managed to keep people in line which served the interests of Rome. He managed to keep the tax collections coming, which also made Rome happy. But he was afraid of anyone and everyone who somehow represented a threat to his continued rule over Judea. He was even afraid of a baby born in Bethlehem, one who had been promised in the holy book, a King of the Jews.

Which brings us to the second King in our story today. There is a song that we used to sing written 20 years ago, called "Humble King". Here are the lyrics:

*Oh, kneel me down again, here at Your feet
Show me how much You love humility
Oh, Spirit be the star that leads me to
The humble heart of love, I see in You
You are the God of the broken
The friend of the weak
You wash the feet of the weary
Embrace the ones in need
I want to be like You, Jesus
To have this heart in me
You are the God of the humble,
You are the humble King*

You couldn't ask for a more different description of a king than Jesus contrasted with Herod. Perhaps the most vivid description of Jesus' coming is given by Paul in the second chapter of his letter to Philippi:

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested

in others, too, and what they are doing. Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. Though He was God, He did not demand and cling to His rights as God. He made Himself nothing; He took on the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form He obediently humbled Himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. (Phil. 2:3-8)

There's an interesting dynamic that goes into how people operate their lives. Those who are most insecure often act as if they are the most confident individuals. Because they are afraid of failing, afraid of being rejected, afraid of having their weaknesses exposed and losing power and prestige because of it. That was Herod's fear, if we read the story of his response to the visit of the magi correctly.

But what kind of personality is on the opposite side from the fearful, insecure and proud person who holds tightly to the reins of power? The humble person who isn't concerned with other people's opinions, but who knows what he or she is about. The person who loves people without looking for reasons to judge them or find them unworthy of their love. The person whose mission is focused on others, on their needs, on bringing out the best in them, in serving and helping and encouraging.

I want you to think for a moment about how long God had to plan for the incarnation, to make all the necessary arrangements for the arrival of His Son on this earth. I remember a Bible teacher who spoke at the Youth With a Mission course that we took back in 1992 and he would often introduce a subject from the Gospels with, "If I had been in charge." This was one of the Gospel narratives where he began that way. "If I had been in charge of arranging the coming of the Messiah to earth I would have had Him descending a spiral staircase made of pure gold, lined on both sides with magnificent angels and landing on the roof of the Jerusalem Hilton while the world's press looked on and the world's political leaders gathered to pay their homage."

You may have trouble reading that kind of account into the Gospels that we have, but we do get a kind of picture of Jesus' coming. He was the illegitimate son - at least by the world's standards - of a young girl from the backwater town of Nazareth. His birth took place in a stable and was announced first of all to shepherds, who were among the despised classes of Israel. The only other people who seemed to be aware of the significance of this birth were magi, probably from Persia. At an early age, He was forced to leave His home country because the insanely jealous ruler was trying to kill Him. As far as we can tell, no one besides a few shepherds and distant magi knew that there was any significance to this birth or cared that it had happened.

And when He grew up, He was introduced by John the Baptist as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then He announced to anyone who would listen that the Kingdom of God had come - and made it very clear that He was the new King.

But He didn't have a bodyguard, had no protection from the powerful people - either Romans or Jews - in his homeland, and he became a victim, a willing one, of their plotting and hatred. What a contrast! From humble and misunderstood beginnings to a shameful and sorrowful end, the King of God's Kingdom never used power to save Himself or to trample on the rights of others. He gave Himself, over and over and over again, to the needs of the crowds, who He saw as being like sheep without a shepherd. Ultimately, He gave His life for them, for us.

I recently saw a movie that I thought was one of the most profound films I had ever seen. It was called "A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood" and tells the story of a cynical journalist being assigned to do a bit piece - 400 words - on T.V. children's personality Fred Rogers, or Mr. Rogers as he's known to many. Tom Hanks, who plays the lead role in the film, was interviewed about whether Fred Rogers was really how he portrayed himself ... or something else. The question that cynical adults asked was, "What is he trying to sell?" The answer, according to Hanks, was that Mr. Rogers wasn't trying to sell anything; he was trying to help little children feel safe in a world they didn't yet understand.

He dealt with a lot of the hard issues that children face: like divorce, like war, like assassination, like racism. There is an episode where he and a friend, who was an African-American, soaked their feet in the same tub of water at a time when black Americans were being banned from swimming pools that catered to whites only. And his message was that anything human is mentionable, and anything mentionable can be more manageable. He was gifted at getting children to talk about their feelings and then assuring them that it was good, that what they were feeling was legitimate, and that they would be okay.

Why go into all that? Being the powerful person, in the way the world uses power, in any relationship, makes you less approachable. It's the position of pride, of "I'm better or more important, than you are." It's the position in which people will play games, tell lies, whatever, in order to gain your approval. But a position of openness, of humility, of vulnerability, is the position which allows people to trust you, to know you, to receive from you. Herod could never get to that place because he made others afraid - that's what he wanted. Jesus taught and practiced love, and people from any walk in life could feel safe with Him. Fred Rogers was one follower of Jesus who made the choice to love people like Jesus loved them and to try to help them through kindness and care. His choice to see the strengths in people rather than to expose their weaknesses gave him the open door to help a hurting reporter find a new and better life.

So, this was God's plan, to come in weakness, defenceless against the evil cunning of those who loved power. He came as a baby, born to a girl barely in her teens, from a backwater town in the sticks. His arrival was announced by a host of angels to a group of despised shepherds on the hills around Bethlehem. A paranoid king tried to have Him killed and His family had to make a run for it to Egypt. His early years were spent in the anonymity of small-town Nazareth and no one really expected that He would change the world like no one else before or since.

What does all this have to do with you and me? It tells us, in the loudest voice possible, that God is for us, that He has opened Himself up to us, that He wants to be known and that He wants both to love us and to receive our love for Him in return.

It also tells us not to be afraid. There are different ways to use power, and Jesus used power to love and serve people, to minister to their needs. He healed the sick, delivered the demonized, brought comfort and hope to people who were desperate, raised at least three people who had died, taught people about faith, about love, about the nature of God's Kingdom and their place in it. Why would people be afraid of that display of power? It's the power of God as He works out of His compassion and grace that brings hope to this world.

We're all used to Herod. We've read about him, in all his many forms around the world today. We've seen his handiwork, the kinds of works that you would expect from someone who sees people as his enemies, who is grasping on to some way to maintain his control over others. We've lived under his oppressive demands and selfish decisions. But we can bear it because we serve a greater king, a noble King who is exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven, a King who served the needs of others and who gave His life to ransom us from the just penalty for our sin, our rebellion against Him. Let's do at least this one thing before we celebrate Christmas with our families and friends: let's give genuine and deep thanksgiving to God that when he comes in power, He comes to change things for the good, to make life better, to heal broken hearts, broken bodies, broken lives. Blessed Christmas!