

## Sermon for Epiphany 2023

Sunday 8 January

**Isaiah 60: 1 – 6; Ephesians 3: 1 – 12; Matthew 2: 1 – 12**

I suspect we've all had enough of royal disputes this week. And, like most of the royal family, I'm going to maintain a dignified silence and not comment on any of it. But we do have another royal dispute in our gospel reading today. The story of the wise men raises the question 'Who is the king of the Jews?' Is it Herod, current holder of the title? Or is it the helpless baby who's just been born in an obscure corner of Judea?

Our first contender is the established king - Herod. He comes across in the story we've just heard, and a little later in Matthew's Gospel, with the account of the killing of the babies of Bethlehem, as almost paranoid in his defence of his kingship. I'm reminded of Presidents Putin and Shi Jin Ping - who have gone to great lengths to destroy opposition and retain their hold on power.

So what do we know about Herod? Well, he did not have a good claim to be king of the Jews. Although he was a practising Jew, he was of Arab descent – so certainly not descended from the line of David, as was Jesus. He had no ancestral claim to the throne at all. He was king because of his family's good relations with the Romans. His father had welcomed the Roman general Pompey when he invaded Palestine in 63 BC, and this began a long period of favour with the Romans. Herod himself was made King in 37BC by the emperor Augustus. Once king, Herod embarked on some massive building projects, including completely rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

But despite this outward success he seems to have been tormented by inner doubt. He married Marianne, a descendant of one of the later Jewish royal lines, the Maccabees, in the hope of boosting his popularity and his claim to the throne. Despite apparently loving her, he ended up murdering Marianne, her two sons, her brother, her grandfather and her mother. Later on he also disinherited and killed his own

firstborn son Antipater. With this history, it's no wonder Herod reacted so strongly to the innocent – or possibly naïve - question from the wise men. 'Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?' And to the knowledge that a new star had been observed – the sign of a royal birth. And it's no wonder that when King Herod was frightened all of Jerusalem was frightened too!

So we have Herod, an absolute monarch (although in thrall to the Romans) – deeply insecure and desperate to hold on to power by any means. Even if it means killing his own family.

What a contrast with our second contender, Jesus. Completely helpless, as all babies are, protected only by his mother. Born of David's line, the line of the kings of the Jews. Heralded by the star which stops over the place where He is. And sought by the wise men who have travelled a great distance to pay homage and to offer their exotic gifts. Then protected by a

dream which warns them not to reveal to Herod where he is.

In Jesus, out of love for us, God takes the extraordinary risk of coming to earth, being born as a baby. He comes, not to a royal palace but to a humble home where He is not safe. His parents must very shortly flee as a refugees. In Philipians we read these words about Jesus "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

Jesus, the King of the Jews, mocked by the soldiers before his death who pretended to bow down before him as King. Crucified under the charge against him, 'This is Jesus, the king of the Jews'. His claim dismissed. Apparently defeated. But God and Lord of all.

Herod does everything he can to cling on to power. But in Jesus, God overthrows all of our human assumptions about power. Jesus, the King of all Kings lays down his life willingly out of love for the whole world. Because Jesus is not

just for the Jews, but for everyone. And, as the apostle Paul understood, God says “my power is made perfect in weakness”. (2 Corinthians 12:9). How much the world needs to hear and understand this now.

God has never stopped upending human assumptions. He’s still doing it now.

In our reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes from prison about how he has been chosen by God to bring the good news about Jesus to the Gentile world. His own shaky start as a persecutor of the church before his conversion means he describes himself as ‘the least of the saints’. His position in prison is not an encouraging one. And we know too that he suffered all sorts of other setbacks and health issues. And yet, through God’s grace and power working through his extraordinary personality and considerable intelligence, Paul did achieve what God had set before him to do. We are here today to a large extent because of Paul’s missionary work. And we still treasure his writings and find new depths in them. God’s

power was evident in his weakness too and worked through him.

And Paul says that it is the job of the church to make known the wisdom of God in all its rich variety to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3:10). In other words, that is our job. We are the church! It’s not the job of another church – a super-church. Somewhere with more people, younger people, a worship band – whatever we might think might make other people listen and understand. It’s our job – just as we are – to witness to the light that has come into the world with Jesus. We can’t assume that we’re too old, or too tired or too busy, because the grace and the power of God is going to work through us too, as long as we will allow it to.

As it says in our first reading today, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” (Isaiah 60: 1)

So let’s go out into the New Year to follow the King of Kings – confident in His strength.

Amen

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