

"A King versus The King"
(Matthew 2:1-18)
by Dr. Walter D. Zorn

Two kings cannot occupy the same throne in the same place at the same time. And yet, that is precisely the situation on that first Christmas morning when the Christ-child was born. Let us compare and contrast these two kings as we begin our journey of the advent season: King Herod and King Jesus.

King Herod was an Idumean, that is an Edomite, descendants of Esau, the pagan brother to Jacob. Herod's family had converted years earlier to Judaism but that did not qualify him to become "king of the Jews." Herod played the political ballgame perfectly and was appointed by the Roman government as King over Judea and with their help he began his rule in 37 B.C., ruling for 33 years. He used raw power, ruthless intimidation, and political savvy to rule from Jerusalem.

Herod the Great's rule can be divided into three periods: 1) period of consolidation from 37 to 25 B.C.; 2) period of prosperity from 25 to 14 B.C.; and 3) the period of domestic troubles from 14 to 4 B.C. It was toward the end of this last period when Jesus was born in Bethlehem (c. 6 B.C.?).

King Jesus came from the tribe of Judah, a son of David, a true Jew who rightfully took his unique kingship in hand at the right time. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Lk 1:32). He was given kingly and even divine names by Isaiah of old: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of Yahweh Almighty will accomplish this" (Isa 9:6-7).

But some doubted. He didn't look or act like a king! Jesus stood with a bloody back and a ridiculous crown of thorns on his head before the Roman governor, Pilate. Pilate asked: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus said: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (Jn 18:33-37).

Even Jesus' closest followers doubted at one time or another. John the Baptist, while in prison, became discouraged and asked: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" And after a strong sermon in which Jesus said "For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink," many began to leave him. At that point Jesus asked the Twelve: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (Jn 6:67). On the other hand, the people wanted a king who could give them free food. When the 5,000 followers of Jesus had been fed miraculously with five loaves and two fish, they wished to make Him their king by force. The text says: "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself" (Jn 6:15). And in

Jesus' last week in Jerusalem he rode into the city on a donkey as the people shouted: "Hosanna to the Son of David!"; "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"; "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"; "Blessed is the King of Israel!" (so the witness of the Gospels). But in a few days they would crucify Him!

King Herod was a great builder! Most of it was politically motivated but some of it was built for his own security. All of it financed by high taxes, slave labor, proscriptions, and tribute monies. Herod built magnificent buildings and even whole cities in honor of the Roman Caesar in order to ingratiate himself to the dominating power of the day and the power that kept him on his throne. He built theaters, amphitheaters, hippodromes, stadiums, numerous palaces, forums, basilicas, baths, several fortresses and even temples to pagan gods in Gentile territory. But the most magnificent building Herod built was the rebuilding of the Jewish temple which began in 20 B.C. and it would not be finished until 63 A.D. It would be totally destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

King Jesus was a builder too! He was a *tekton*, a carpenter, yes, but more, probably a "stone-mason." Between 12 and 30 years of age Jesus probably worked with Joseph helping to build the new Roman city of Sepphoris, just 5 miles from Nazareth, a place where there was much work. When Jesus drove out money-changers in the temple the authorities asked a miracle of Him to prove His authority to do such. Jesus retorted: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (Jn 2:19). The temple was already over fifty years in the rebuilding process and there yet remained thirty more years of building before its demise. At that time the rabbis said: "He who has not seen the temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building." Of course, Jesus was talking about his own body as a temple, being crucified but on the third day being raised alive! Jesus would build a new temple not made with hands. On another occasion at Caesarea Philippi, a pagan city built to honor Caesar as "God of gods, and Lord of lords," Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was. Peter spoke and said: "You are the Messiah (the King!), the Son of the Living God." Jesus replied: "And I tell you that you are Peter ("Rocky!"), and on this rock (bed-rock of Peter's confession?) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades (death) will not overcome it" (Matt 16:16-18). In fact, Jesus not only builds a Church but the entire creation is due to Him: He is the Logos with God in the beginning: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (Jn 1:3). In Jesus' last week in Jerusalem his disciples admired Herod's buildings: "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (Mk13:1-2). Today one can see these very stones that were thrown down by the Romans in 70 A.D.! King Jesus was a great builder. This building of a "new temple" cost us nothing, it cost God His Son!

Herod was a king with a family. But he was so paranoid about his position and power that he suspected many in his own family of sedition and assassination plots. His enemies were many from the Pharisees and their people (who saw Herod as a half-Jew at best and a friend of the Romans), the aristocracy (who supported the previous rulers), and the Hasmonean family (the source of most of Herod's family trouble). Herod killed 45 of the aristocracy and all who could possibly be rivals to his throne. He even had the high

priest drowned though he feigned innocence. Above all, he executed many of his own family, his mother-in-law, his wife (Mariamne), and three of his sons, the oldest, Antipater, just five days before his own death by disease! (c. March, 4 B.C.). Such was Herod's reputation that it was reported Caesar Augustus once said he would rather be Herod's pig (*hyn*) than Herod's son (*huion*). Thousands died at Herod's hand when he considered anyone or any group a threat to his kingdom. He was so loathed by the public that he had all notable Jews from his realm locked up in the hippodrome and commanded his soldiers to execute them so there would be mourning throughout Judea when he himself died. When Herod died, they were not executed.

Jesus had an earthly family of a mother, brothers and sisters, Joseph apparently having died before Jesus' ministry began. Jesus confronted his own family when they sought him on one occasion. Jesus asked: "'Who are my mother and my brothers? Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mk 3:33, 34).

On instructing the Twelve as Jesus sent them out he said: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:34-39).

On another time Jesus taught: "'I tell you the truth, . . . no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first'" (Mk 10:29-31).

Once Jesus startled a crowd following him by saying, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26).

But all who become part of Jesus' family find life and have it to the full (Jn 10:10). In fact, when Jesus was put to death on the cross, no one had to die as a result. Rather, an earthquake occurred and Matt 27:51-53 says: "The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people." Today Jesus' family continues to grow, made up of all ethnic groups in the world, and consisting of 1/3 of the population of the world in all its variations and manifestations.

Finally, we look at Herod as a religious man. Our text (Matt 2:1-18) is the story of Magi looking for the Anointed One (Messiah) whose star they had seen in the East. Naturally they would inquire in Jerusalem concerning this new-born king. Herod was "disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." No wonder all Jerusalem was disturbed with him, for Herod's jealous fits could cost the lives of thousands at any given moment. Herod lied when he said he wanted to come and worship the child too! He wanted only to kill him just like all other rivals for the throne.

Jesus, the King, as a baby was helpless before Herod. But God, the Father, protected Him before every step of Herod's intentions. Sadly, that protection did not go beyond the One Child. Many young males, two years old and younger, were put to the sword by Herod's heartless soldiers. Rachel weeps for her children! (Jer 31:15; Matt 2:18).

The original Christmas was accompanied by uncertainty, anxiety, fear, tension, helplessness, and sorrow. Only as we look back over the centuries can we rejoice and sing songs of joy to celebrate the birth of the Messiah, the King. We still live in a world of raw political power, crass materialism, and dysfunctional families which all have destructive effects upon the peoples of the world. Only Jesus, the King, as "Lord of lords, and King of kings" can bring true peace, contentment, and love to this world in which we live. Will you humbly kiss the King today? (Ps 2:12). Will you submit to his rule and authority and enter His kingdom?

Prayer

*God we confess that ours is still a world in which Herod seems to rule:
The powerful are revered, the visions of the wise are ignored,
the poor are afflicted, and the innocent are killed.
You show us that salvation comes in the vulnerability of a child,
yet we hunger for the "security" of weapons and walls.
You teach us that freedom comes in loving service,
yet we trample on others in our efforts to be "free."
Forgive us, God, when we look to the palace instead of the stable,
when we heed politicians more than prophets.
Renew us with the spirit of Bethlehem,
That we may be better prepared for your coming.
Amen.*

Song: "Welcome To Our World" by Michael W. Smith