

A study of opposites, Joseph and Herod

Matthew 2:13-23.

Dec 2019

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”

21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Message

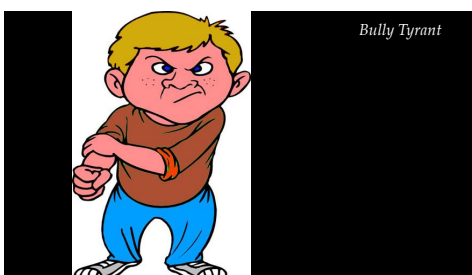
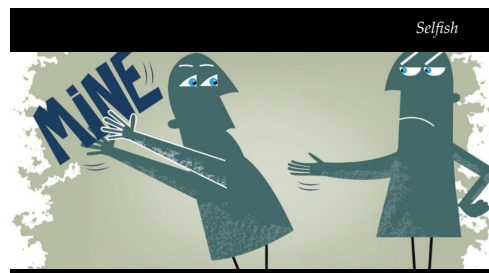
Joseph and Herod

Introduction



There are broadly speaking two types of men. There are men who use their power and strength for others. Then there are men who use their power and strength for themselves and are always seeking to increase their own personal power.

To describe this in other language some men are selfish and others are generous as servants and supporters.



Men who use their strength and power for themselves are obviously selfish but it can get worse if they use power against other people. The name we give to men or possibly the odd woman who is as selfish and uses power against people is a ‘Tyrant’ or a ‘bully’.

At your school there might be a big strong boy who hits out at others and makes everyone afraid and most people keep distance.

Your school tyrants are still small tyrants but they can get bigger and then things go really bad. Tyrants always exist. People like Hitler and Stalin, or Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein lived to inflict so much death and suffering on innocent people. This is nothing new.

King Herod was a tyrant so when Jesus was born in his Kingdom, he was not safe. A tyrant is dangerous and Herod was a big tyrant.



Message



In today's passage Matthew gives a contrast between Herod and Joseph, as two types of men, the tyrant and the good man. Joseph and Herod are two characters in the nativity story who are so different because they reflect humanity's basic responses to God's gift of God-self in Jesus Christ to humanity. Let's look at Joseph first.

By this time Matthew has told us of four occasions when Joseph received God's guidance by way of a dream. The first may well have been the most difficult for Joseph. He was told to take Mary as his wife, even though she was already pregnant. This was a bold step of faith for Joseph. Yet I am sure that having found the courage and conviction to obey God, he was now better able to hear and respond to God's leading, something that was to be of vital importance in the coming months.

Why was Joseph able to hear God and obey?

I think that somewhere in his life Joseph had made a basic decision, a foundational choice, or a policy resolution. He decided to consider God in all he did. He resolved that his life was to be lived in such a way that it served God's reign. Joseph himself would orientate all he did so that it served God's interests. This is a powerful and truly radical commitment. Someone making a decision like that at the core of their being, is not left swinging for long. Circumstances will soon arise that require follow through on this policy of serving God.

On the other hand we see King Herod. He was on his throne for 36 years and was thus very able. He was famous for his building programmes which included beautifying the Jerusalem Temple and his famine relief work. In many eyes today that would make him a good supporter of the 'Church'. He retained favour with successive regimes in Rome which suggest a man of considerable diplomatic skills and political skill.

He too had made a fundamental decision and commitment. His commitment was to retain power at all costs. He was a king at the pleasure of the Romans over a Jewish population who resented him because he himself was actually an Idumean and only half Jewish. As his life progressed he became more and more ruthlessly committed to his policy of retaining power at all costs. Anyone or anything which threatened his hold on power was eliminated. This paranoiac lust for power even led him to kill his wife and three sons. Even the Romans were shocked at this. The Emperor Augustus is famously known to have remarked that he would rather have been Herod's pig than his son! It was this obsessed commitment to maintaining power that led Herod to have all male infants of Bethlehem killed. In the

event, this may have been a dozen or so children, not historically significant in some ways yet it threatened the very life of God on earth and our redemption now.

Joseph was open to God's leading and had the will and courage to obey because he had decided to put God first as the guiding light of his life. Because of that God used him to protect and care for Mary and Jesus. In total contrast to this Herod had like all tyrants, placed his own hold on power as the primary guiding principle, his ultimate concern. Consequently he was not interested in hearing God let alone compromising himself to obey or cooperate with God. Over the 36 years of his reign the eyes of his conscience and the ears of his heart became hard, set in stone, unable to be reached. He became an enemy of God without ever knowing it, working against God's work on earth.

The sobering lesson is that any allegiance or commitment that is not with and for God will ultimately be against God.

Application.

Herod didn't become a monster over-night just as Joseph did learn to hear and respond to God in one day. It took Joseph time, faithful commitment and the courage and will to change. He learned through time to soften his heart to God's bidding and then respond. With practice it became the natural way for him to live.

Unless we too move and grow in such a direction of obedient response to God, we will drift backwards towards becoming an enemy of God's purposes. It may be like continental drift, a few millimetres a year, but it's direction will be towards passive compliance or even active participation.

For the New Year, can we make a resolve to soften our hearts towards God and respond in loving obedience at every opportunity. We can resolve to be like Joseph in this world and not like Herod.