

Two thousand years ago, the entire world changed, and human history was rewritten. A long promised king was born. God was doing a new thing, a glorious thing. Two thousand years ago a woman gave birth in Bethlehem. She held her innocent child in her arms. Two thousand years ago an evil king was so desperate to keep his power he took that child out of its mother's arms and murdered him.

In this way, evil triumphed over the innocent children who were destroyed, but God's ultimate plan was not stopped. Evil could cause great suffering, but God's plan could not be stopped.

Herod the Great was, for all his other crimes, a talented ruler. He was politically shrewd, and his family had shown loyalty to Rome, thus elevating himself in Rome's good graces. He was a strong soldier, and said to be in excellent physical condition. He was talented at oration, and he was an accomplished builder. He had managed to claw his way to the throne in a tenuous political climate, and he had no intention of letting it slip away.

In fact, Herod the Great loved power so much that he would sacrifice almost anything for it. His first and favorite wife was said to be the love of his life, and by all accounts, they loved each other passionately. But his wife made the mistake of speaking to her husband as, well, her husband, and her honesty with him was used against her. He had her killed for allegedly plotting against him, a crime of which she was certainly innocent. Herod would later kill his own sons for much the same reason.

So it comes as no surprise this evil and cruel man would extend his crimes to those outside of his own family. Herod the Great knew that a rival was dangerous to him. He was hated by his own people, and any rebellion could result in his own demise, either from the rebellion directly or, perhaps more likely, as a punishment from Rome. When the magi told him of this miracle child, the king of the Jews, it did not matter to

Herod that this was a thing of God. All that mattered to Herod was his own will.

So he ordered the innocents killed in and around Bethlehem. The exact number of children is unknown. Some church liturgy claimed anywhere from 14,000 to 144,000. The catholic church, however, rightly noted that Bethlehem was too small to provide such numbers, and it is generally thought between 18 and 36 children lost their lives. These children are referred to as the first martyrs, and are venerated as such. If you care to look, you can find gorgeous art depicting them all around the virgin and child in heaven.

This great crime, the massacre of the innocents, is characterized by Rachel weeping for her children, by the broken hearts of the mother. The joy of the newborn king is quickly threatened by the tragedy that follows, much as the good cheer of Christmas fades into the concerns of everyday life.

Herod the Great was far from the first ruler to murder innocents. Pharaoh ordered the midwives to murder the male children of Israel, an order they disobeyed. Many of the religions of ancient times incorporated human sacrifice, especially of children, and this appears to have been a practice taken up by the people of Israel at certain times. In all of Scripture, however, no society that condones the murder of innocents survives. Egypt would fall, the tribes around Israel would fall, and even Israel herself was severely punished for such crimes. Herod is no different.

The fundamental problem in each of these examples is a willingness to commit evil acts in order to get ones own way, to maintain power, or to maintain or get the life one wishes to live. In each of these cases, evil is done because someone wishes their will over Gods.

The Gospel is so antithetical to the values of this world we should not be surprised when we face evil as we try to do God's will. Jesus redefined what power and glory meant, and taught there was but one king and one will that mattered. Jesus called us to a different life, a life which by its very unfolding condemns evil. When we live as Christ called us, even silently, we are witnessing to God's will and against sin and corruption.

We are shining the light which reveals the darkness, and the darkness, desperate to hold onto its ways and enraged by the truth, will often rage against us.

Christ calls us to protect the innocents, to sacrifice our own will and desires for others. Christ called the midwives Shiprah and Puah to risk their own lives to protect the children sentenced to death by Pharaoh. Christ called the prophets to risk everything to speak out against the human sacrifices of the surrounding nations, and to condemn the evil of their own people when necessary. Christ called the magi to risk Herod's wrath by refusing to turn over the newborn king. The world calls us to seek our own will, Christ calls us to seek God's will. The world calls us to pursue our own desires, to look out for ourselves above all, Christ, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Christ calls us to die to self that we might live for God.

Herod the Great had great power, and thus could and did carry out great evil. We have no such kings, but that is not to say our society does not sometimes condone terrible things, or that we cannot harm others in our own pursuit of our goals. The messaging from our society is that our will is the most important thing, and it doesn't seem to matter much who is harmed along the way. Such societies cannot last. Indeed, such societies are not really societies at all, but a collection of broken people all against each other.

Christ calls us to a different life, a life where we are all siblings, we are all united under the reign of God, seeking God's will over our own. We are to sacrifice for one another, even unto the point of death, as our spiritual ancestors did.

I have a particular interest in WWII history, particularly as my grandfather served in it and had some extraordinary stories to tell. I am particularly interested in the fall of the Philippines because my grandfather was there when it happened. My grandfather was in the navy, and he and his shipmates decided to make a daring escape in a small boat, not twenty feet long, and sailed successfully from the Philippines to Australia. This plan was ridiculous and stupid and somehow, by the grace of God it worked, and I would not be here had it not. And if you're wondering

where I get my spunk from, I would guess it would be from my grandfather.

But the story was very different for those who could or did not escape. After the surrender, the Americans left behind would face one of the most tragic war crimes, the Bataan death march. One such person was Chaplain Robert Preston Taylor.

During the death march, soldiers were deprived of food, water, or even basic human dignity. If a man tripped, he'd likely be killed, and if someone stopped to help, he'd likely be killed too. Blistering heat, a long grueling journey, and the atrocities the men faced quickly defeated morale. Taylor, however, could not stand by and watch innocent men suffer. Throughout the entire march, he was severely beaten and tortured for his persistence in aiding his fellow men. At one point he was tortured to the point where all believed he was dead, and the men asked for his body for burial, only to discover he was, in fact, still barely alive. He could not stand by and watch others suffer, even if it meant his life. Taylor did miraculously survive, however, and eventually became the Air Force Chief of Chaplains in the early sixties. There is a small exhibit dedicated to him at the National Museum of the Air Force. Truly, Taylor exemplified what it meant to live for God, to sacrifice oneself for others. Imagine the world we might live in, if all people could willingly give of themselves no matter the cost for others.

Friends, so often our society teaches us to show concern only for ourselves. This attitude only serves to harm our souls, to harm others, and to erode our very society. Christ calls us to a different way, to seek God's will and keep God's commands even when it is difficult, and even when we stand to lose everything. Sometimes, God may call us to do this in big ways, like the midwives of Egypt, like the prophets, like the magi, and like Chaplain Taylor. Sometimes God may call us to do this in smaller ways, by speaking up when we see evil, by standing up for people who are being wrongly harmed, or even by doing something as simple as speaking about your faith openly, covering a meal for someone in need, or inviting someone to church even if you have social anxiety and it feels really weird. These things are important, because if we stay silent, the pharaohs and the Herods are left unchecked and our

very society simply cannot stand. So let us find a way to die to self each and every day, listening for the ways in which we can stand against evil and for the gospel in all things.

Rev. Kate Mauch
December 29, 2024