

## ***The King***

In the name of him *born* King of the Jews, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten evening devotions, as we've been examining the roles played by some of the central characters of our Lord's passion, what we've been witnessing (in part, at least) is a study in opposites. For example, first we had Jesus who is ever faithful and always loyal, betrayed by Judas, one of his closest friends. Then it was Jesus who openly confesses his love for all people, denied by Peter, the man who claimed to love him most.

This theme of opposites came into even clearer focus as we got into the legal trials that Jesus was made to undergo. Two weeks back we considered Caiaphas the high priest, who held that office illegitimately. He was appointed to his post by men against the clear Word of God. And before him stands Jesus who, ordained by his heavenly Father, forever holds office as our Great High Priest. So the one and only real High Priest is condemned by a fake one – and for speaking the truth, no less. We saw something similar last week when we looked at Pontius Pilate. Then in was Jesus who will judge the world in righteousness being wrongfully condemned by an unjust judge who knowingly sentenced an innocent man to death in order to save his own skin. So an unrighteous judge condemns the righteous Judge of the whole earth.

We've got one more this evening. This time it's two kings facing each other: Jesus of the house and line of David who was rightfully born King of the Jews being tried by Herod Antipas, a man who claimed the title "King of the Jews", but who was in no way qualified to hold it. Allow me to give you some background on him.

His father was King Herod the Great. And "great" is a fitting word to describe him. He was a great manipulator, great weasel, great liar, great monster, and great impostor. He was from a wealthy Edomite family that wanted to climb higher on the social ladder. The Edomites, you will recall, were descendants of Israel's brother Esau, and throughout most of their 2000 year history were bitter enemies of the Jews. But as I've said, whenever possible the Romans liked to rule over their subject nations through the political structures and noble families that were already in place. And what happened in a time of unrest and instability in Palestine, Herod schmoozed up to the Romans and put himself forward as the best candidate to bring peace to that troubled region. It involved a lot of deceit, clever politicking, and bribery; but it worked. Marc Antony assigned Herod to rule over the region of Galilee, which was a largely Jewish state. And later the Emperor Augustus expanded Herod's territory to include Samaria, Judea, and some others, and he allowed Herod to hold the title "King of the Jews".

The Jews objected strenuously to having Herod as their king – he wasn't a royal and he wasn't a Jew; but he was more or less shoved down their unwilling throats by the Romans. And outwardly Herod did some things to placate his unhappy subjects. First, he pretended to follow the Jewish faith and its traditions. All indications are that he remained an unbeliever or idol worshipping pagan; but at least he went through the motions of acting Jewish. Second, he began a series of building campaigns. Some of these were for palaces and fortresses for himself, and others were for the benefit of the general public. But they all put a lot of money into the economy that helped everyone. Ah, but his most clever trick was to embark upon a lavish forty year project to renovate the Jerusalem Temple along with its surrounding grounds and outbuildings. This earned him the reluctant support of the religious leaders. They still didn't like

him; but they liked what he was doing. So they discouraged opposition to him from the general public. And so did Herod: he was brutal to anyone who opposed him.

To be sure, he was brutal to anyone he only *suspected* of opposing him – even within his own family. He had at least half dozen wives and numerous concubines to whom were born a number of sons. And as Herod grew older, he became quite paranoid, imagining that many of them were plotting against him to take his throne. On the merest hint of suspicion of one such plot, he had his favorite wife executed with one of her sons; and from time to time he'd have other sons killed. It became so commonplace that Emperor Augustus quipped "it's safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons". You see, the pigs were safe because Herod pretended to be Jewish.

It was toward the end of his life when his paranoia was at its worst that the wise men showed up looking for the child born King of the Jews. Herod's response was to slaughter the Bethlehem infants. He wasn't taking any chances. He died not long after that. And just to give you a further insight into his rotten character, he was so concerned that upon his death there would be no mourning that he had 200 of the most prominent citizens of Jerusalem rounded up and imprisoned. He gave orders that they were to be executed the moment he died. That way he'd be assured that there'd be weeping at his funeral. Fortunately, these orders were not carried out.

Upon his death, his kingdom was divided among three of his sons who managed to survive his purges. Herod Antipas, the man before whom Jesus stood trial, was given Galilee and Perea – the latter being a region east of the Jordan formerly known as Moab. Herod Philipp II was given Traconitis, which today is the area we call the Golan Heights. And Herod Archelaus was given Judea and Samaria. This latter fellow didn't last long. Due to his arrogance and incompetence, the Emperor soon replaced him with a Roman governor – which was the position eventually held by Pontius Pilate.

But back to the Herod brothers. The kingdom of their father having been divided, the Emperor decided that the lands they governed weren't big enough to be considered kingdoms in their own right, so they were assigned the title "Tetrarch" rather than "King". This stuck in the craw of Herod Antipas, who insisted that his subjects call him "King of the Jews" as they did with his father. It's a safe bet that he didn't use that title in official correspondence with the Emperor. But this is what I meant when I said earlier that Herod Antipas wasn't qualified to hold the title "King of the Jews". He wasn't a king, nor was he a Jew.

But regarding his "Jewish-ness", he learned from his despotic father the tactic of trying, outwardly at least, to act like one. To be fair, it seems that he did believe some of what the Scriptures had to say; even if he didn't take it to heart in such a way that it changed his moral behavior. He was far too worldly for that. Whereas his father had proven himself to be an able administrator and nation builder, Herod Antipas was more devoted to indulging his carnal appetites. He'd rather eat, drink, gamble, and enjoy the company of women than do the hard work of ruling.

Biblically, we first hear of him when John the Baptizer condemns him for running off with and marrying the wife of his half brother, Herod Philipp I – who is not to be confused with Herod Philipp II, another half brother, who ruled over Traconitis. Yes, with them all sharing so many names, it gets complicated. To make it even more confusing, the woman in question was named Herodias, and she was the daughter of yet another Herod brother.

For publically decrying the sin of Herod Antipas, John was imprisoned. It was Herod's attempt to silence him; though we're told that privately, Herod still liked to hear John preach. He'd pull the Baptizer up out of the dungeon from time to time and listen to yet another scathing sermon. But that's always as far as it went. And here's the thing that's strange: Herod believed that John was a genuine prophet of God. That's why he was afraid to harm him. And at some level, Herod must have believed the message of repentance that John proclaimed. That's why he liked to hear him preach. But in the end, Herod always refused to repent. He knew the Word of God to him, and he rejected it. Eventually, as you remember, his unlawful wife arranged to have the Baptizer silenced for good by tricking Herod into having him executed.

The episode disturbed Herod greatly. He was stricken with guilt. And when word of Jesus' rising popularity reached his ears, he even feared that Jesus was John the Baptizer come back to life to extract his revenge. But over time that fear passed. Just as he had failed to heed the repeated warnings of John, so also he ignored and eventually silenced the voice of his guilty conscience.

And this more than anything is the tragedy of Herod's life. Some of the saddest words in the entire Bible are these: "Jesus answered him not a word." During his trial before Caiaphas, Jesus does engage in some conversation. It's true that he never responds to the charges against him, but he does have things to say. He speaks the truth. It's the same with Pilate. Jesus never responds directly to the charges, but he does speak to Pilate about matters of truth. But with Herod there's nothing. Not a word. Just silence. Before the false King of the Jews stands the true King – the Creator and King of the whole universe; he who is the Word made flesh and in whose Word is the power to create and sustain life. And he says nothing.

Why? The reason is simple enough. Jesus knows not to cast pearls before swine. It's telling that Herod not at all interested in weightier matters. Caiaphas, wrong-headed though he was, was trying to save a nation. Pontius Pilate, initially anyway, was endeavoring to maintain justice and release Jesus. But Herod, when he's judging a case upon which a man's life depends, wants to see magic tricks. And when he doesn't get a response, he and his entourage make fun of Jesus. To him the whole thing is a joke. Something tells me that he's not laughing now.

Thus Herod Antipas stands as a warning for us. Each and every one of us in our rebellion against the Lord attempts to play king. We act as if our word, our ways, and our pleasures are matter most. And very often in the process, we have to deliberately silence the word of the true King who calls us to repentance and faith. We silence too the voice of the Holy Spirit who speaks through our consciences to warn us. And eventually through our suppression of guilt, the conscience is seared and the heart is hardened to the point that God's Word no longer has access. And when that happens, the Lord stops speaking. Then all hope is lost.

Therefore may we learn from Herod's tragic mistakes to always receive the Lord's admonitions with fear and trembling, that with contrite hearts we may turn from our sins and hear the Word our Savior will speak to us: that for his sake we have been forgiven. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***