

One of the things that glaringly comes through as you read the gospel passage for today is that Jesus was born at a time that held little to no regard for human life. Emperors and kings reigned supreme, considering themselves equal to gods. They held the power to kill, and there was no one to hold them accountable.

We like to think that eventually Christianity changed all that for many parts of the world, but we all know the reality is quite different: eventually human nature succumbed to its pre-Christian idolatry – the “divine right of kings” comes to mind as an example. Thanks be to God, this kind of idolatry has been extinguished in most (but not all) of today’s world.

Today we find ourselves thinking again of that old terror by the name of Herod. Actually, there were several Herods in history, but two are mentioned in these passages – the one who is known as Herod the Great and his son Archelaus, who succeeded him. The former Herod was indeed “great” in military successes and in knowing how to placate and bribe the Romans who held power over the world they had conquered. He built cities and magnificent edifices; he is said to have married 10 wives, and had scores of children.

Alas, he also suffered immeasurably as a result of so many conflicting desires and machinations for his throne. Katerina Whitley describes all this in her retelling of Herod’s story:

He was named “King of the Jews” by Octavius, who later came to be known as Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. There were so many internecine killings in Herod’s family (almost all of them related to his fear of losing his throne) that it seems quite plausible that he was also a man capable of ordering the slaughter of innocent children. He may have been *called* King of the Jews, but Herod was not burdened by any of the religious commandments of the Jewish God. He was much more like a Roman emperor than a Jewish king in the tradition of David. And the Jews never quite accepted him as one of their own, even if his ancestry was at least partly Jewish.

Making matters more complicated for us who look upon this story from the perspective of history, there is no reliable historical corroboration for the biblical account of the flight to Egypt. The Christians of Egypt, the Copts, haven’t let that stop them,

however. They remain, to this day, utterly convinced of the story's truth, specifying numerous places as giving shelter to the holy family. This all serves as a reminder that the evangelists did not have the same concept of history that we have today. And yet...do these stories matter?

Of course they do.

Look at the history of the Herods and compare them to the stories of Jesus – the child born to a poor young mother who said “yes” to God; the child protected by a good man named Joseph who obeyed the words of the messengers of God. Who made a difference in subsequent history and in the hearts of human beings? Who is remembered with love and devotion? Who is worshiped and obeyed? And whose life and death changed the world? Think about Herod and then think about Jesus of Nazareth. Whose kingdom do you prefer?

- One bribes the Romans with money taken from the taxes of the poor people of Judea in order to curry favor with the conquerors and hold on to his throne. The other urges his followers to give what they have to the poor while he himself lives as one who has nowhere to lay his head.
- Herod uses violence that brings forth more violence; Jesus resists violence by offering peace and forgiveness.
- Herod builds palaces and temples to his own glory while Jesus builds the kingdom of God by turning the values of power and wealth upside down.
- One lives by injustice, the other by justice.
- Herod orders death while Jesus offers life.

Who is the one we long to emulate?

The story of the flight to Egypt, of a poor couple and an infant escaping to another land, has given hope to millions of refugees the world over. It is possible that thousands of refugees have been given asylum and been resettled by churches because of the memory of the One who started his life as a refugee.

Historians, both Christian and secular, try to denigrate these stories of the infancy and childhood of Jesus as written by Matthew and Luke by calling them “legends.” The first answer to this is that the evangelists were not writing history but were telling a story of faith. The second answer is a kind a comparison that may help us put things in

perspective. In 31 B.C., a great battle took place at Actium, a Greek port city. Antony and Cleopatra, great and famous personages of their time, were defeated soundly by Octavius, who became the all-powerful Roman emperor, Augustus. This is documented in history. Nearly three decades later a son was born to Mary of Nazareth, an obscure village in Galilee. In the eyes of the contemporary world, Octavius/Augustus was all-important, a self-proclaimed son of god. Yet none of his acts proved to be godly.

In the eyes of the same world, Jesus was unknown and ignored; yet his followers came to be convinced that he, indeed, was God's Son. His life and death testified to the love, justice, and mercy of God.

Who, of these two, does the world now remember? Who, of these two, has made the greatest difference? On this day we remember only Jesus of Nazareth with gratitude and praise. Thanks be to God.