

Dec 4th 2011 "An Incredibly Wicked Man" Matt 2:13-23

There has always been wicked people in our world and there always will be, but at times there emerges such a personification of evil in human guise that it is said of them, "there goes an Incredibly Wicked Man". In recent history we think of Hitler, Stalin, Hussain, Idi Amin, Gadarfi, Magabe and unfortunately, several others.

When Jesus was born, King Herod the Great was up there with the worst—in fact he was possibly a lot worse than the ones I have just mentioned. The Bible records just his name in Luke 1:5 and then makes mention of him in Matthew 2 and nowhere else. Yet from that mention we begin to see the evil of a man who would wantonly murder all the children two years and under in a certain area of his country, simply because of the threat they could be to his throne.

Herod was born in BC 73. His father was not a Jew by birth but came from the country of Idumea which had been conquered by the Jews several years before. At that time the whole population had been forced to convert to Judaism and were, from that time on, never really accepted as 'the real thing' in terms of their faith. His mother was the daughter of an Arabian sheik and consequently Herod's claim to be a Jew or even a half Jew, was very fragile.

Herod's father, Antipater, was a strong and conniving military general and politician with a knack of aligning himself with the strongest powers. He supported one of two Jewish princes who were struggling for the Jewish throne and when the Roman General Pompey favoured the same prince, Antipater grabbed the chance to impress the Romans. They rewarded Antipater in BC47 with the title of Regent over the Jews and he was given Roman Citizenship for himself and his family. He then appointed his son Herod as Governor over Galilee.

Immediately Herod became to show the brutality of his character with a suppression of the bandits in his district in a fashion that caused horror and alarm amongst the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who ordered him to face charges before them in Jerusalem. His opponents thought that this would be the end of him. However, Herod turned up

at the Sanhedrin with a very large band of heavily armed bodyguards and the charges, though true, were quickly dropped.

During this period of time major events were changing the face of the Roman Empire, yet somehow Herod kept favour with Rome through all this. The different rulers knew of his murderous ways but preferred him to the other possibilities. He was extremely pro-Roman and set out to make Jewish Society as Greek and Roman as he could.

In BC40 the Parthian Empire waged war against Rome in the Jewish corner of the world and did so with some success. Herod was forced to flee Jerusalem and his nephew was appointed as king. Herod fled to Rome where he convinced Marc Antony and the Senate to restore his power. So when the Romans re-conquered Palestine they gave Herod control of three Roman legions with which he conquered Jerusalem and proclaimed himself as king.

The population was very much against it. The Romans were forcing a king upon them who was not a true Jew, was brutal, and was not wanted. Herod used force to put down the rebels and also killed 45 of the 70 member Sanhedrin.

In many ways Herod was very good for the Nation. He was a prolific builder and through his good relations with Rome brought prosperity to the Jewish nations and many fantastic buildings were completed or begun. Despite a life style that was decadent he spent years restoring and extending the Jewish Temple in order to convince the population that he was a good Jew, but they never accepted that.

In other ways he was extremely bad. Rewarding his favourites while destroying any whom he felt might possibly oppose him. He encouraged Greek and Roman practices in every way and put non-Jews into positions of great authority. His army was a non-Jewish force of paid mercenaries.

Scholars believe that Herod suffered from a mental instability that made him extremely paranoid and a megalomaniac. This is seen in the many atrocities he committed just to safeguard his kingship. He

married Mariamne in order to cement his claim on the throne while he already had a wife Doris, and a three year son. So he simply banished them into exile.

He appointed Mariamne's brother as his puppet high priest and then had him drowned when he saw how popular he was becoming. Then, when Mariamne was just 29 he had her executed on charges of plotting to murder him, then his mother-in-law a year later, and then 3 of his sons. Because of his well known refusal to eat pork Caesar Augustus made the famous comment, "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son".

Herod was an Incredibly Evil Man—there is no doubt about that. At the age of 69 we see him as a fearful, old, and sick man, clinging on to his throne with such ferocity that at the merest whisper of a child born King of the Jews, he is prepared to slaughter the wise men, and does indeed kill about 20 baby boys in the Bethlehem area.

Herod perpetrated the act that darkens the Christmas story. Alongside the images of the star, manger, baby, shepherds and wise men that we so delight to beautify, lurks the wickedness that ever seeks to destroy. Thankfully you won't find Herod on any Christmas Card. Yet the part he played in the Christmas story as an instrument of wickedness can't be ignore.

John sums it up best at the start of his gospel when he says in 1:4-5

⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The word translated understood can also mean overcome, and that makes a lot of sense in the context. Herod's act shows that the Evil one was there at the birth of Jesus seeking to overcome God's plan by destroying the Christ child but was unable to do so.

But the word can also mean understand or comprehend and there is a sense that the evil one could never understand the Lord's way of waging war. For God did not meet evil in a bloody battle that would

destroy all, for if He had we all would have perished for all have sinned. We too were part of the Kingdom of darkness.

But instead God came into the world and lived as a human so that as a human without sin He could, by taking the punishment of our sins on the cross, rescue us from out of that kingdom of darkness.

If the devil was expecting a face to face battle of force against force, then He never got that. He will one day and his final defeat is pre-ordained. Instead He saw Almighty God take on weakness, and first through Herod, and later on through the Jewish leaders, through Judas, through Pilate and those who crucified Him, the Devil attempted to destroy the Saviour of the world but he failed. Completely and utterly.

And what we see in the story of Herod, sad though that story is, is one of the devils great defeats. A defeat in which innocent children died as a result of his evil, and that is still happening throughout our world today. But the Light that now gives life eternal was not destroyed. He lives.

Consequently at Christmas we should not only celebrate the birth of the Christ child but we should also celebrate the victory over the powers of evil that was won. Yet in our celebration, we must not forget those who suffered during that first Christmas season, for in so many ways they are still with us today.

Our world is full of the casualties of evil. The Herod's are still out there. The incredibly wicked of our world motivated by evil to pursue their own selfish gain at the expense of millions. Victims of injustice, of greed, of lust, of murderous hate, of empire building and arrogant anger. They cry out to us who have experienced the victory that Christ gives for help and for hope.

The Baptist Aid Christmas Appeal this year has the motto, 'What Does Jesus Want For His Birthday?', and in response asks us to give to those who, because of wars, dictators, and greed—whatever financial offering we can afford.

My challenge to you this morning is to see that as just one way you can celebrate the victory that Light won over evil during that first Christmas season, while at the same time giving some hope to the victims of evil in our world today.

And there are other ways too. Like what Jenny will be doing in going to an orphanage for the disabled in Thailand and then spending her Christmas helping feed the homeless in Sydney. And I know some of you will be helping to feed the homeless here in Perth while others will be supporting those who do such things. We do not truly show our thankfulness for what Christmas means to us without caring for those who suffer because of the battle of evil against righteousness. How you will do that is your challenge.

Herod died a few months after this shocking event, a lonely, hated man. His death was extremely painful. Evil will never triumph, but it will harm along the way. Our calling is to seek to lessen the effect of that harm and to do so in the name of our Victorious Saviour.