

SERMON FOR YEAR C, CHRISTMAS 2

MATTHEW 2:1-12

BY THE REV. TOREY LIGHTCAP

SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

JANUARY 3, 2010

“KENOSIS”

Without a doubt, Herod was powerful and intelligent –
An architect of both building projects and society,
Resurrected in some press lately as having been misrepresented by history.
He was also ruthless and, as we've just read,
He was comprehensive in his efforts to eradicate any sense of competition
For the position he held.
So much of everyday living in the Roman Empire was bloodsport;
An individual human life wasn't worth much,
Especially if it was from the lower ranks of society,
Such as this child of rumor, the Christ-child.

Continuing on past this point in Matthew (it ends so conveniently),
Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt with his family,
Which he does, under cover of night, until Herod dies.
Herod, meanwhile, sends out for the slaughter of every child under the age of two
In or around Bethlehem.
Matthew is pretty clear that the reason Herod does this
Is because he feels tricked by the magi, and he's angry;
That, and, we suppose, he feels threatened by any power other than his own.
So don't peddle me the misunderstood ruler,
Or Herod as a composite scapegoat for the sins of society-in-general.
How he acts is precisely how people of power have acted for millennia.

One of perhaps the church's greatest sins
Is that we do not encourage people to identify with persons from the Bible
Really other than Jesus himself,
Or, at the very least, “the good guys” – David, Paul, Moses, Abraham.
It seems natural to want to do that,
But I want to submit to you, with great respect,
That that's keeping fully one-half the Bible at arm's length,
And so I believe we really *can* call that sinful.

On behalf of the church and those who teach in it –
Elders, priests, popes, preachers and teachers and catechists –
You have this cleric's apology.
We have not taught you the power of understanding so much of Scripture,
Even though we have sometimes been admonished to think for ourselves
In just that way.
That's a sin, for which the church must repent.

We *need* to be able to identify with Herod –
Not in order to absolve him of his sins,
But to see how very much like him we are.

We, too, are of two natures.
We have within us both good and bad,
Light and shadow,
The capacity to do well by the world or to destroy it.
Life is complicated – so many shades of gray –
But often our approach to life comes from these basic motivations.

We, too, grub for power, strength, and authority.
We, too, have a place within us
That would do *whatever it takes* to ensure for our own survival first.
The fact that we do this
On a smaller stage or scale than Herod,
Is virtually insignificant.

By and large, brothers and sisters, Christianity does not help on this count.
We're encouraged to use religion to see ourselves as winners,
When Christ is really trying to speak to our destitution and poverty of spirit,
Our losing, our bleeding, our hanging on the cross.

Herod is that dark part of each and every one of us
That no charity, save for the grace of God, can reach.
We may think we can hide it away with masks and making nice,
But who do we think we're fooling?

Herod is that part of each and every one of us
That stings whenever our sense of sovereignty is threatened by the least thing.

Herod is that part of each and every one of us
That responds to the intruding world and all its needs with six unkind words:
I do for me and mine.

If the ministry of the person Jesus whom Herod opposes is marked by anything,
It is that constant reaching-out beyond himself,
Through iron-clad personal space, past all our comfort zones and codes of purity,
And into the lives of those who are accounted as less-than ...
Not to destroy, but to build up.

The main difference between Herod and Jesus
Is that *Herod lives to be served and Jesus lives in order to serve...*

I can imagine hearing all this and saying,
*That's well and good – that's a nice contrast drawn from history,
But what has that to do with me?*

One response is that old saw: that opportunities for service abound.
It's true; just look around, and you'll quickly find a way to be of service.
That's absolutely true,
As true in this congregation as anywhere else.

A few examples might suffice.

One.

You have probably heard that serving on the Vestry of this parish is a dreadful task
In which the fine points of highly boring administration are regularly beaten to death.
Well, that may be the rumor, but it's false.
Our conversations have been vital,
And I believe that those who have spoken up in Vestry have been heard,
As a wide variety of concerns have been laid forth and prayed over.
There are further plans in Vestry this year to expand on the consideration of mission
Alongside the other concerns of the parish.
2009 was a productive year for the Vestry, with 2010 showing even more promise.
And yet.
When we started asking for those interested in Vestry in 2010 to make themselves known,
There was a deafening silence.
Probably people were imagining those interminable meetings.
I know that among us there are capable people with gifts right for leadership at St. Thomas',
Who feel if they were just to be asked, they would step forward.
Consider this the asking.
Please, think on it, pray on it, and come see me or Toby.

Two.

Today is a day I've been looking forward to for weeks now.
We're going to get as many teenagers together after the 10:30 service as we can find,
Stuff them full of pizza,
And see what happens.
As I've said from this pulpit before,
The youth of this parish must be a priority from now on.
Think well on how you might serve those folks.
Consider this the asking,
And visit with Greg Jones or Ron Brinck or myself.

Three.

In March, we'll kick off an event designed to be held each year near St. Patrick's.
It will be a fundraiser for our community garden project.
Whether you have experience in an Irish dance troupe,
Or you can just make a mean haggis,
Consider this the asking,
And visit with any member of the Publicity Committee –
Jacquie Lightcap, Zach Nelson, Anne Phetteplace, Amanda Beller.
Or if you want to help get the community garden project on track,
Consider this the invitation,
And talk to me or to Pat Johnson.

Plenty of other examples exist; you can fill in numbers four and five and six.

The point this morning is not merely that things get done,
Though surely the need exists.
The point is really that we begin, and continue,
Doing what Jesus did,
Which is simply to serve, rather than *be served* –
To know what it is to stretch beyond oneself, beyond the Herod-impulse,
For the benefit of someone other than ourselves and our families.

In these cold opening days of the year,
With a decade of pain and avarice disappearing in the rear-view mirror of our lives,
It may seem a little odd to ask you to extend yourself even more.

There's a fancy word for that: theologians call it *kenosis*.
It refers to self-emptying, as exemplified by Christ himself on the cross.
Jesus didn't do *kenosis* once-for-all;
He showed us how it worked, then he left it to us to do.
Today it's expected as a characteristic of all mature Christians.

Let us, then, do two things at once today.
Let us acknowledge that we are Herod and we are Christ in equal parts,
And let us strive to live lives of service,
For such is Christ.

Amen.