

"THE CRADLE THAT ROCKED A THRONE"

TEXT: "When Herod the King heard this, he was
troubled, and all Jerusalem with him"
(Matthew 2: 3)

INTRODUCTION A king upset by a baby. Cradle power unnerving a royal throne. A strange and curious turn of events. Usually kings are troubled by malcontents who are capable of insurrection or some enemy troops camped along a border. But a child - and only a few weeks old at that! Curious, indeed. Most unlikely. If we were trying to explain this scene to the boys and girls of a Sunday School class, we would sooner or later have to say that this was no ordinary king, and that this was no ordinary child!

HEROD THE KING You'll recall that Herod was the puppet king of Judea. He had been placed there by Rome in return for keeping peace in the province. Herod is not a "heavy" as kings go. His territory was relatively small. Chances are we would never have heard of him had Jesus not been born under his political jurisdiction. He is not to be numbered with such as Charlemagne, or James I, or Frederick the Great.

Herod came from a corrupt and a detested family. Consistently and fittingly, he is described as cruel, crafty, capable, passionate, and intensely suspicious. A man of great physical and moral violence, he had his three sons killed as well as his wife. And to insure mourning in the land when his time came, he had some Jews rounded up with orders that when he died, they should also be killed. It comes, therefore, as no great surprise that Herod decrees that all male babies two years and under should be slain with the sword.

Herod was not a heavy as kings go, but he is certainly one of the worst villains reported in the Scriptures. He outranks such Biblical unworthies as the Pharaoh of the Exodus, Nebuchadnezzar, Goliath, and yes - even Pontius Pilate.

"He was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him". An agitated king can set an entire city to seething, just as a tyrannical father can put an entire family on edge!

To me, it is one of history's curious twists that this vicious and cruel king should be juxtaposed with Jesus in the nativity story. Jesus - awaited by the faithful, heralded by angels, visited by shepherds, sought out by Wise men. Jesus - around whose head clustered the hopes and dreams of the ages. Jesus - marked and destined for a special role in the history of mankind. Herod and Jesus. Cruelty and compassion. Force and love.

WHY WAS HE TROUBLED Have you ever stopped to wonder why Herod was troubled? His troubled nature can be understood on two different levels. Let me suggest both of them to you in the next few minutes.

First-off, he was troubled because this is a moral universe. To explain what was eating Herod we need do nothing more than invoke the familiar insight of Paul in his Letter to the Galatians. Remember what Paul said:

"Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap"

There it is. I think Herod provides us with an extreme example of a common human experience. He was his own worst enemy. He carried about within him his own darkness

and thus was always somewhat fearful of the light.

This concept of a moral universe comes with the force of novelty to an age that can hardly distinguish right from wrong...an age that lives with the Gallup Poll morality and consensus ethics. There are times when we give the moral factor rather short shrift in our analyses of problems. We're quick to cite the political factors, the economic factors, the social, cultural and psychological factors, but - as if obvious to all - our neglect of the moral side of an issue is coming home to haunt us in different ways. Our moral indifference may yet be our downfall.

We're a troubled people, living in a troubled time and troubled world. The whole scenario that you and I have witnessed here at home these past twenty-four months around such things as Watergate and the oil crisis and the numerous strikes are cases in point. Such situations can be described in political terms, and they have been. They can be described in economic terms, and they have been. But they can also be described in moral terms as the vengeance of man's greed. One faction after another in our society is constantly reaching out to get its share. Prices keep going up. Where and when and how will it stop.

I'll never forget reading in the papers a few years ago when floods hit parts of Pennsylvania and scores of people died and homes were destroyed, that the price of body bags tripled inside of twelve hours. Economically, we would call that the law of supply and demand. Morally, we would call it human greed. (Lippman)

I think we dare not get so sophisticated in our theology, so accommodating in our love of the world, that we fail to witness as Christian people to the moral order on which men and nations can be made or broken.
violated

Herod had mocked God. He had broken some fundamental laws. There was hell to pay. It was a hell of his own making.

SECOND REASON

But Herod was troubled for yet another reason. Symbolically, Herod represents a present that is always under the threat of a future.

Even if Herod had had a clean slate, even if he had been an upright man, he would still have felt the insurgency of what Christ was representing.

I took you to Galatians a few minutes ago. Let me take you now to a passage in Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians. In Chapter I of that letter, we find some words that had best be read either in Bethlehem's manger, or at Calvary's cross. Here they are:

"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose things that are not - to bring to nothing the things that are!"

Think about them. Those first two phrases or couplets we can understand in terms of the manger and the cross - things foolish to shame the wise, things weak to shame the strong. But what do we make out of that third phrase - "God chose things that are not - to bring to nothing things that are". Paul here is introducing us to a philosophy of history. He is giving us foundational material for a theology of hope!

Golin Morris has written a new book entitled "The Hammer of the Lord". In it he makes this insight, this highly suggestive comment:

"Our societies" he says, "and our systems are merely existing alternatives to the creative possibilities still capable of superseding them if they fail to achieve their 'God-given' purposes.....it is a terrible pride that blinds us to the truth that any force or power in history which is not of our making has an equal or even greater right to exist than our own".

He is simply saying that things that are are always being threatened by things that are not, that what has actually been realized in history is always being pressured by the "not yet" that is in transit....coming and moving in. To put it as clearly as we can: ALL THAT IS - IS THREATENED BY THE OUGHT TO BE THAT ISN'T.

It reminds us, therefore, that all human power - whether personal or regal - is provisional and tentative. Said Paul,

"God chose things that are not to bring to nothing - (that is, 'to render inoperative') - things that are".....including...

including all the Herods of this world. That's why Herod had the babies slaughtered. Give Herod credit for being smart enough to see that what he was about and what Christ was about could not permanently co-exist. Thirty years later in Jerusalem that's why the crowd said to Pilate, "Give us Barabbas". "We'd rather have him loose and running around stirring things up than Jesus of Nazareth". And that is why Pilate hardly lifted a hand to save Him.

The things that are are always threatened by the things that are not. We often catch a glimpse of it at the personal level. For instance, a girl at the tender age of 19 marries the wrong guy for the wrong reasons. But being somewhat noble of spirit, she decides to tough it out, but that marriage that is is always overshadowed by the marriage that is not.

Or, a young man gets out of high school. His parents urge him to go on for further training, but he goes for the quick dollar and the first job offer. He marries. Children come along. He finds himself chronically under-employed. Even though he whistles on his way to work every morning, his heart is somewhat heavy with the thoughts of a vocation or a life that is not. It's the universal cry:

"O for a man to arise in me,
That the man I am may cease to be".

And the point holds for the larger scene. Herod's troubled nature confirms in our understanding that evil is a usurper. It is real alright. We must not go the path of Christian Science and try to deny its reality; no amount of positive or negative thinking can wash it out of existence. Our Scriptures do not tell us that evil is unreal. They tell us that evil presently occupies a place that doesn't belong to it, that it is always judged and crowded by the pending order of another Kingdom.

"The wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest". Whence the tossing and the restlessness? "The way of the transgressor is hard". Whence the hardness? "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people". Whence the reproach? "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades..." Whence this withering and this fading?

No lie can live forever. Evil is up against (in Daniel Willaam's words): "God's unalterable will to redeem!"