

## **“Grace Wins” – Mat 2:1-12**

Although I haven't listened to the news this morning, it seems as though we've made it through the New Years events without a major terrorist strike. Everybody's been a little bit on edge the past few weeks, especially with the heightened alert status in the States, and the increase of violence in the hot spots of the world. Of all the people in the news who I would not want to trade places with, the one that stands out for me is President Musharraf of Pakistan. Now there's someone who is really caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand he has the President of the most powerful nation on earth pressing him hard to toe the line on policy, and to seek out and destroy activists within his own country associated with terrorism. President Musharraf has no option but to comply. Should he pause to consider doing otherwise, I'm sure that images of former allies of the most powerful nation, namely a couple of fellows named Hussein and Bin Laden, and how they quickly fell out of favour, come to President Musharraf's mind, and produce not-so-pleasant images of how he himself might well be treated.

The other element (I'm not sure whether it is the 'rock' or the 'hard place') squeezing President Musharraf is provided by some of his own people. There have been a number of attempts to assassinate him since he took power in a bloodless coup, with a couple of really close calls in the past few days. It seems as though certain Islamic Fundamentalists have decided to replace him, and have a determined campaign to do so, but with a different kind of coup. Should they be successful, we will all find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, as we remember that Pakistan has an undetermined number of nuclear weapons, and the capability to deliver them significant distances.

President Musharraf has a very delicate line to walk to balance these two forces, and we certainly can understand why he continually looks over his shoulder to see who is ready to take his place.

I find the similarities between his position and that of Herod in Jesus' day fascinating. Herod also had the impressive might of the then-current world's superpower breathing down his neck, prodding for a relentless pursuit of anyone who would dare challenge that might. Herod also was caught in a squeeze, between Rome demanding that he clamp down tightly on any signs of rebellion, and the people fretting under his rule, seeking, demanding, and occasionally acting to throw off the yoke of foreign oppression. We can also easily understand why Herod would also look continually look over his shoulder to see who was ready to usurp his position.

There were many who were ready to do just that, and the worst of them were the religious fanatics, many of whom rose up and claimed that their particular leader was the chosen one, the new king. We can easily understand in these circumstances just how Herod might be upset when some foreign dignitaries arrive, unannounced, and ask directions to the baby who was born to replace him. But this was surely not the first time somebody had challenged his position, as he seemed particularly skilled at 'taking care of business'. With what we can imagine as sleek, even slick and oily gratuitousness, Herod used grand and palatial welcomes in public, secret and nefarious meetings in private, all to accomplish the same end – search and destroy. Techniques that had worked so well for him in the past, but this time something was different. This time not only the end but the beginning is vastly different.

This time the story begins simply, and seemingly innocently enough, with the birth of a baby in a small town not too far from Jerusalem. Not the kind of event that would make the daily papers, let alone reverberate around the world. But babies have a way of capturing and directing the lives of everybody around them, and this baby deeply impacted the lives of kings and foreigners alike. In a simple, one-line birth announcement Matthew proclaims how this tiny event was actually the beginning of conflict between two kings, a conflict that would grow to represent the struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness, between life and death. “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea” ... a simple enough declaration, but even in its simplicity echoing the birth of the mightiest monarch in Israel’s history, King David, years before in the same place. And to fully set the king-versus-king scenario, Matthew reminds us that this already-significant birth took place in the days of Herod, the king. The drums of conflict and holy war are already beating in the background in the first line of this story of proclamation, and it quickly becomes apparent who is on which side, who represents the forces of evil and darkness, and who represents the forces of goodness and light.

It is so unlikely that a baby could be the champion for the cause of goodness and light, and yet we immediately are handed clues that such is the case. A mere baby, but one whose birth is so significant that it causes ripples in the fabric of the universe detectable far outside the boundaries of Israel. A birth creating ripples detected by foreign astrologers, wise men neither numbered nor named, who could see what was to come even if the Israelites couldn’t see it right under their own noses. The arrival of a baby producing signs, portents and forces so strongly good that even these rich and powerful men were drawn to travel from afar to see for themselves, and in so doing fulfilling the prediction long before written in Scripture, prophetic pronouncements that the leaders of all nations would come to worship this special one born to bring light to the whole world.

The true character of the other king in the story, Herod, also soon becomes readily apparent. Troubled not so much by the arrival of these foreign potentates as by their searching for “the king of the Jews” and meaning “not him”, Herod soon becomes the arch-villain in the story. A number of unflattering images come to mind, ranging from the “Snidely Whiplash” kind of sleek, sneaky character twisting his long, pointy moustache and laughing with evil intent, through the Sheriff of Nottingham so beautifully portrayed by in the Kevin Costner version of Robin Hood, to the rotund and malevolent self-serving Nero-figure in movies about Rome. Those images are fuelled by the actions of Herod, surrounded by a large staff of power-seeking toadies, calling for secret meetings with the foreign dignitaries, and carrying out nefarious acts of probing and seeking for the newborn child while professing outwardly the best of motives.

Fortunately, nobody is fooled, least of all the rich and powerful foreigners. While Herod stealthily gropes around in the dark, the light of God divinely guides the wise men *to* the Light of God, and with no trouble at all they find the child Jesus and his mother Mary. In further fulfillment of prophetic scripture these foreign emissaries in audience before a king open both their hearts and their treasure boxes, and offer both gifts of great value and their loyal worship. As the story draws to a close, it comes as no surprise that these men, called ‘wise’ for good reason, who were able to detect from afar the impact of this holy child upon the whole world, were also able from close up to detect the darkness and deception in Herod’s heart. No fools, these wise men, they were traveling with open

tickets and they changed their itinerary and slipped back out of the country while Herod and his snoopers were busy looking for the baby Jesus in all the wrong places.

If we had read on further, we would have been treated to Herod shouting in rage and sending out his murderous agents to do harm, but even here we have the full intent of Matthew's proclamation of God's grace winning over the forces of darkness and evil: that this child was truly the Messiah, the holy king of Israel past, present and future; that this was the branch of Jesse's lineage, the one promised long before in Scripture, to whom the nations would come with gifts and worship; that this was the Son of God who would bring the light of God's love to all nations, even to the whole world. Indeed our very presence here this morning bears witness to that proclamation, not that we are kings or presidents or powerful leaders, but we have heard the ripple of God's grace triumphant throughout the universe; we do come from every corner of the earth, from Asia, Malaysia, Africa, Europe, North and South America (even from West Van!), all gathered to offer praise and worship to that child born so long ago in Bethlehem of Judea. Like the wise men, we come bearing the gift of ourselves, opening our hearts, offering what we have in his service, presenting ourselves to him.

For most of us, I'm sure, the path to find that holy child, the fount of all goodness and light was nowhere near as simple and as clear as it was for the wise men. Many if not all of us have wandered in our own darkness, until we were drawn to God's light like a beacon. Thanks to God's grace and mercy we have responded and followed that Light, and like those wise men kneel before the Christ child, paying homage and offering ourselves in His service. But also like the wise men, we are called to move on. The story didn't end with the wise men moving in, or even setting up camp in the house where they found Mary and the child. They moved on, back into their own lives, touched, affected, and changed by the encounter but back into their own places they went.

During the Christmas season and especially on Epiphany Sunday we have the blessed opportunity to re-enact their encounter, to be touched again by the event and significance of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea, born the king of the Jews, the Son of God, the light of the world. But once we have knelt before the child, and offered our gifts, it is time for us to once more move back out into our own places, and in so doing to carry forth the light brought by Christ. Time for us, shaped by his universe-shaking goodness to go and let that goodness shine forth in us, and in our actions. The ways to do that are as numerous as the stars, the places in which to do good are as diverse as our backgrounds, but they can be summarized in Christ's own words: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the grieving, visit the lonely, love one another. It's not always easy, and there will be times when you will provoke the anger and hostility of the world towards goodness. But the call is as clear as the light of God's love that will guide you, and as strong as the love of God that will sustain you.

Go, shine forth that light and love of God in the name of the child born in Bethlehem of Judea, Jesus of Nazareth, even Christ our Lord.