

What images come to your mind when you think about being a king? For most of us, the first things we probably think of are castles and crowns, feasting and fine clothing. Being a king is about luxury and wealth.

But if we thought further about it, we might come up with some more cynical thoughts. We might think about the word “king” as the founding fathers of our country did. With images of unjust taxation and armed revolution. We might think about the word “king” as the Roman Senate did before they assassinated Julius Caesar. With images of tyranny and oppression.

Honestly, both are true. History is littered with kings who did live fairy tale lives in castles with feasting and fine clothing. And they did so through tyranny and oppression and the unjust taxation of their people. As much as we may enjoy glamorizing monarchies of the past and fantasizing about what it might be like to live as royalty, the truth is that there has always been an ugly side to being a king.

And that is especially true for the king in our Gospel lesson this evening: King Herod the Great. King Herod lived a glamorous, opulent life. He undoubtedly feasted on fine food and, given his tendency toward the extravagant, we can just imagine what his wardrobe must have been like. He built palaces and castles. He built a massive, Greco-Roman-style Temple to the Lord in Jerusalem. Not because he cared all that much about what the Lord thought about him. But because he wanted Jerusalem to be a place that could rival Rome itself in its grandeur.

But King Herod also lived up to the worst reputation of kings. Those fine feasts and impressive wardrobes, those palaces and castles, even that grand Temple to the Lord, were built on the backs of his people. Paid for through ridiculous, unjust taxation and oppression. And while Herod may have lived in luxury, he did not particularly enjoy his life as king. As he grew older, he developed a truly psychotic level of paranoia. Murderously executing anyone who he believed might be conspiring against him.

To this king, in all his majesty and all his wickedness, come Wise Men from the East. They’ve seen a star and have followed it to find the king of the Jews. Herod is king of the Jews, at least as far as the Romans are concerned. That’s his title. Caesar may be emperor and his governor may rule the land of Judea, but the Romans have placed the people of that land, anyone who calls himself a Jew, under the jurisdiction of Herod. He’s what’s known to historians as an ethnarch. A king who rules over a particular ethnic group.

So these Wise Men follow this star to the land of Israel, all the way to Jerusalem, to Herod’s very court. They probably expect to find that Herod has had a new baby. A new son. A new heir. But there is no new son. No new heir. Just a very paranoid, blood-thirsty king, who does not appreciate the suggestion that someone other than him is going to be king.

Our text says with good reason that *“when Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”* When the king ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. This is terrifying news for anyone close to the king.

Herod is furious. Probably all the more so because he’s helpless. He knows nothing about the prophecies of the Messiah. He’s supposed to be the king of the Jews, but he knows nothing about God’s Word. He’s forced to ask the chief priests and scribes where the Christ was to be born.

And when they tell him from the prophet Micah that the Christ is going to be born in Bethlehem, he doesn’t rejoice. This should be good news of great joy for all the people! Unto them is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord!

But, no, Herod doesn’t rejoice at this news. He schemes. *“Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”* Herod has no intention of coming and worshipping the child. He only says this so that he can find the child’s location and kill him.

This is how it is with the kings of this world. And nothing has really changed since that time. We see it in our own rulers. OK, maybe they're not as bad as Herod. In fact, every once in a while, you may even find a truly good and decent man or woman in a position of power. It does happen.

But over all, I think you'll all agree, the rulers of this world look a lot more like King Herod than the idealized kings of fairy tales. They lie, they cheat, they steal. They spend their lives secretly scheming to increase both the size of their own purse and their power over their people. And even when they get caught, so many of them get off with a slap on the wrist. They live above the law. Such is the life of kings.

And yet, despite the fact that we know all this, we trust them. We trust them to run our nations and our states and our cities. We trust them to run our corporations and our banks and our military. The truth is that our primary concern is not preventing King Herod from coming to power but making sure that our King Herod comes to power.

Because we want to believe that our King Herod is different. That they are not motivated by their own greed and pride. And when our king rules, there's a ray of hope for us. Maybe this King Herod will be different. Maybe our ruler will really do what's good and just and right.

Like I said before, maybe they will. But if we trust in the princes of this earth, we will more often find out that they are sinful people after all. Then our hopes will be temporarily dashed until another King Herod arises who promises to be better than all those before. And the cycle of hope and disappointment will begin again.

And pretty soon we end up with a society like the one we have today. Filled with despair over its leaders. Ready to collapse into anarchy at any moment simply because our leaders of both government and business have failed us so many times.

When you follow the kings of this world, that's where you inevitably end up. But we don't follow the kings of this world and we have no reason for despair or hopelessness. Because, like those Wise Men, we're not seeking King Herod. We seek the true king. We seek the true Christ. The true Savior, born in Bethlehem. And the king we seek is nothing like King Herod or any other king of this world.

The Wise Men discovered that immediately. When they get to Bethlehem, they don't find a palace or a castle, with a royal family gathered around a feast wearing fine clothes. What they find is a very poor family in ordinary circumstances. They find a laborer and a young mother and a child who probably didn't look all that different from the other poor children of that time. He wasn't set apart by fine clothes or a grand home. No, what set this child apart was the star that had led them to his side. What set this child apart was the prophecies of his birth and the angels that announced his coming. What set this child apart was God's Word.

And so these Wise Men show their wisdom by worshiping this child. Even though he looks nothing like a king, they give him gifts fit for a king: gold, incense, and myrrh. Gifts that will likely give his parents the means to hide him from the murderous rage of King Herod in the days to come.

Because, you see, this child isn't just the king of the Jews. He is the king of all creation. And he has a very special plan to accomplish for his creation. A plan foretold by prophets just like Micah, whose words directed the Wise Men to Bethlehem. For Jesus will be a king unlike the kings of this world.

He will be a king who judges not just by the outward appearances or what his sinful mind can understand, but he will judge hearts with absolute righteousness. He will not just punish the body with the limited threats of the sword, but will punish the soul with fire and eternal wrath. He will not just be a good king, he will be a perfect king. One who rules perfectly because he himself is sinless and holy in every way.

And yet, despite all that perfect judgement and perfect wrath and perfect holiness, his greatest acts as king will not be in judging others, but in serving them. Serving the poor and the sick and the crippled with acts of healing. Serving the guilty and demon possessed and the outcast with words of forgiveness. Serving his own disciples by washing their feet.

Jesus is a king who served the whole world by dying on a cross. King Herod spent his reign killing others to remain in power. In fact, just after the Wise Men leave Jesus side, Herod will murder all the infant boys of Bethlehem in an act of pure evil. The kings of this world kill to show their power.

But Jesus was killed to show his power. To show his power not to kill others, but to destroy sin, death, and the devil. To show his power to forgive sins and rise from the dead and give new life through Holy Baptism. Jesus is king over all the Herods of this world because he did what they will not: he sacrificed his life for sinners like you and me.

And he continues to serve and to sacrifice to this very day. For he does not dine on rich food or wear fine clothes or live in grand palaces. Instead, he offers us the rich food of his Body and Blood. He gives us the fine clothes of his own righteousness, which covers all our sins. He prepares a place for us in his Father's palace. He continues to serve his Church through Word and Sacrament.

The story of Epiphany is the story of two kings and the Wise Men who met them both. They chose to put their trust and their treasures in the better king. For Jesus looked nothing like the kings of this world. And that was exactly what they were seeking. Amen.