

Reflection on Matthew 2:1-8 – Jeff Cook

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

The question is first asked by the wise men who have seen a star – a celestial sign of the birth of someone important, someone blessed by the ‘gods’.

But then the question is asked a second time: “Where is this child who is being called the king of the Jews?”

Only this time the question is asked by the ‘King of the Jews.’ The question is asked by King Herod!

Herod was what historians refer to as a ‘client king.’ Herod, as a supporter of Marc Antony, had previously helped Rome conquer Jerusalem. As a thank you, Rome appointed Herod ‘King of the Jews.’

He received mixed reviews. Herod engaged in massive building projects – restoration of the temple in Jerusalem, building the seaport of Caesarea Martima, constructing the fortresses of Masada and Herodium.

Some of the Jewish population appreciated the rebuilding of the temple, but Herod remained an employee of Rome. Wealth flowed to Herod and Rome through taxes and confiscation of land. Herod could also be violent, having several members of his own family executed.

So when travellers from another land arrive in Jerusalem and say that they have seen signs in the heavens of the birth of a new ‘King of the Jews,’ Herod is anxious. He does not want any competitors for his title. He does not want some ‘other’ king to stir up popular protest and rebellion.

So Herod calls together the scholars, the priests, the people who know the traditions and aspirations of the people, and he asks them, ‘Where is the king of the Jews, where is the Messiah, the people’s saviour, the anointed one, to be born?’

They consult the scriptures, the stories, the writings of the prophets, and they tell Herod – “Bethlehem is the place where kings are born”; Bethlehem – birthplace of their legendary king David.

Then Herod returns to the travellers, tells them to go to Bethlehem, and tells them that when they have found the child, they are to come back to Herod and give him the child’s coordinates, so that the King can go to welcome the new king! It is a chilling request. Herod is not thinking of a peaceful transition of power. Herod is thinking of a military strike to eliminate his future competition.

This part of the story doesn't get depicted on modern day Christmas cards. This part of the story reminds us that Jesus' life may begin in a Christmas card friendly cozy stable, but his life will end on a Roman cross of execution.

This part of the story reminds us of how ungodly our God seems to be. In science fiction and adventure movies, when someone wants to become a god, they want to become all powerful, invincible, mighty, able to do anything they want, unstoppable, unbeatable – someone to be feared and obeyed.

And the symbols and images of God that appear in Christian sanctuaries – a cross – an instrument of state torture and execution; perhaps an empty cross; perhaps Jesus nailed to a cross, suffering and dying. We see bread that will be broken and shared. We see a table. In Advent, we see a stable, a manger, a baby and the baby's peasant parents.

As we follow Jesus through his life, we find him stopping to listen to those whose bodies are broken, whose eyes are dimmed, whose skin is covered with rashes and sores. We find him touching them, blessing them, welcoming them, healing them. We find him eating with the social outcasts. We find him living a transient life, walking from village to village.

We find him being arrested, tortured and executed.
All powerful, unstoppable, unbeatable, invincible -???

The God embodied in Jesus is a God who suffers amongst us, who heals amongst us, who loves amongst, who is vulnerable amongst us.

The God embodied in Jesus is found first in a stable, and later in an empty tomb.

Herod asks, "Where can I find this child?" – thinking that the answer will allow him to end the life that comes into the world in this child.

But Herod could not, cannot end the life that comes into the world in this child– for in this child is the life of this God who is amongst us. In this child is the hope, the peace, the joy, the love of God.

In this child is the way that can save the world – the way of compassion, healing, forgiveness, and a suffering, reconciling love.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of peace. The peace of Christ is not the peace imposed by power. It is not the peace of violent conquest and forced submission.

The peace of Christ is the peace that binds together all creation, all creatures, all people.

The peace of Christ is the peace that we find present even amidst suffering and life's times of challenge.

The peace of Christ is God's gift of God's love that abides in stable and cross and empty tomb; God's love that is with us, amongst us and within us.

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

This child is in the heart of God – with us, amongst us and within us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN