

*Not control and intimidation but love and invitation.*

Homily for January 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2024  
Feast of the Epiphany.

Why did Herod try to destroy Jesus, but the Magi worshipped him? The difference can be summed up in one word: humility. The Magi had humility; Herod lacked it.

And history tells us where that lack of humility landed him.

- Herod spent his life trying to keep everything under his control.
- He became pathologically suspicious.
- He ended up murdering his own wife and three of his sons, because he thought they were plotting against him.
- In fact, his whole life was a series of violent, horrible crimes.
- His tyrannical fear of losing control eventually made him universally hated, even by his closest collaborators.
- As he lay dying, he ordered a thousand of his best servants and ministers to be led into a stadium and slaughtered, because he wanted to be sure there was mourning and sadness in his kingdom up on his death.

Joseph Stalin, the equally bloody tyrant of early Soviet Russia, followed a similar path.

- He climbed the ladder of success by lying, double-crossing, and murdering.
- And once he had reached the top, he systematically eliminated all potential rivals.
- But soon he began to think everyone was a potential rival.
- He sent his best friends to concentration camps in Siberia.
- He became so suspicious of plots against his life that he slept in a different corner of his house every night.
- He too died fearful, miserable, and half-crazed.

These extreme examples illustrate the all-important fact that we are not God. God is God. How often will despots use control and intimidation to manipulate people. Whereas God influences us by love and invitation to entrust ourselves to him.

What I am about to say is a hard lesson to learn. We are not meant to control everything; we are meant to humbly follow Christ, to trust him, to kneel before him, like the Magi, and say with our lives, "Thy will be done, not mine; thy Kingdom come; not mine."

Herod couldn't say that Stalin couldn't say that - the Magi could. They gave everything over to Christ. And they went home full of joy.

Christian joy is like the deep parts of the ocean. The ocean reaches depths of more than 11,000 metres, but only the top fifty metres are affected by even the most violent storms. God's faithfulness is as constant and dependable as those deep parts of the ocean. The heart that dwells in those depths can stay joyful even in the middle of life's hurricanes.

About a year before he died, St John Paul II was already in visibly declining health. He couldn't move himself around, he couldn't speak clearly - he was an icon of pain and suffering. Everyone knew he wouldn't be with us much longer. An American bishop visited him about this time, for the official five-year updates that every bishop gives to the Pope. At the end of their meeting, the bishop, with a sad look in his eyes, said to the Pope: "Holy Father, it saddens me to think that this is probably the last time I will see you." St John Paul II looked at him and said with a smile, "O really, Your Excellency? I didn't know you were having health troubles."

This is the kind of joy God wants to give us; a deep, strong, meaningful joy that can put our sufferings in their proper perspective. Because God is faithful, we know that whatever happens, he will continue to guide our lives to their fulfillment, even during those times when, for short periods or long ones, the star goes behind a cloud.

But realizing and trusting God will guide our lives to fulfillment is not easy. That is because unlike Herod and Stalin who ruled with an iron fist from a worldly throne, Jesus is very different. He rules with an open hand marked with the piercing nails of crucifixion and his throne is our hearts.

The words written by Isaiah some six hundred years before Jesus was born express this. When we come to see Jesus as the one who is to be enthroned in our hearts we can affirm with Isaiah:

***Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear before you.***

Think about this in relation to our Gospel reading. The tyrant Herod represented the darkness covering the whole earth. His influence was intimidating, instilling fear in people, and then there was this little child, a toddler at most. The wise men from the East saw in this child the glory of the Lord. But it was far from obvious. And this is because although God will give us signs, unlike the despots, whose actions are governed by control and intimidation, God's actions are governed by love and invitation. This is why most people at the time of Jesus and even today miss him. They wanted him to be a king who would rule with earthly power. When they came to make him king, he ran away. Instead of running for office, he ran from it. Why didn't God make that clear in the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah? Why did God deliberately inspire his prophets to speak so ambiguously? What do I mean by this? Well, when you read Isaiah this sure sounds like an earthly kingdom.

***"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, and the wealth of the nations shall come to you."***

Doesn't this sound like the kind of allegiance and universal admiration Herod craved? And while these words have found fulfillment in the worship given to Jesus by so many today, it is not in the literal way the passage seems to suggest. So why the ambiguity and the possibility of misunderstanding? Because God is love, and what love wants is not first of all minds but hearts. Remember his throne is to be your heart and mine. The obscurity of mind is a test of the heart. God gives us enough light to enlighten us so that if we want to find him, we will, and if we don't,

we won't. "The one who seeks, finds" (Matt. 7:8). But those who do not seek, do not find. He is testing us, because he is love and therefore, he wants hearts first of all, not minds. We don't get into heaven by passing a theology exam but by loving God and neighbor. He is testing our hearts, our loves. He is therefore inviting us to look to the Magi who enthroned Jesus in their hearts and had the depth of joy like the ocean environment 50 metres below the surface.

To become more like the Magi and less like Herod it is important that we know ourselves in relation to Jesus. We have to honestly look at the level of our selfishness. Then we will be able to kneel before the Lord and lay that selfishness at his feet in confession, just as the Magi laid their gifts at the feet of the baby Jesus.

The Holy Spirit has provided a perfect thermometer for taking our selfishness temperature: How do we react when our plans and hopes are foiled? Herod planned on ruling Judea without opposition. When potential opposition shows up, he blows up, lashing out with violence. When things don't go my way, when I don't get my way, do I explode like that?

The Magi planned on following the star right to the newborn King's doorstep. But when they reached Jerusalem, the star suddenly disappeared. Their plans were foiled. What did they do? Throw a tantrum, like Herod? No, they stayed calm and looked for another solution. They persevered in doing good. They didn't let adverse circumstances poison their faith. That's how God invites us to live. Gradually we can learn to trust God in all circumstances. He is the King - not us. He is wise and good beyond all our reckoning, and we want to invite him onto the throne of our hearts. Because remember he influences by love and invitation, not control and intimidation.

Today after receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, let's ask him for the strength to fight valiantly against the Herod in our hearts; to have the courage and perseverance of the Magi. And let's promise to confess our sins and keep going, keep seeking the star, keep allowing for his love to govern our hearts as we follow Christ, the everlasting Lord, making our hearts his throne.