

Homily for Feast of the Epiphany

January 5-6th 2019***The Herodian and Magian Spirits***

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens is an annual tradition for me where each year during the Twelve Days of Christmas I listen to a wonderful rendition of this tale, read by Jim Dale. If in the Dicken's classic there are the spirits of Christmas, Past, Present and Future, in Matthew's Epiphany text there are two spirits presented. There is the Herodian spirit that is then contrasted by the Magian. I want to show how Ebenezer Scrooge explicitly moves from the one disposition to the other in the course of that Christmas Eve Night in which the story is set. I will describe the Herodian spirit as a calculating disposition and the Magian spirit as a Christ-adoring disposition.

1. The Calculating Herodian Spirit.

So let us consider the calculating, Herodian spirit first.

We are given insight into Herod's disposition in two of the verses in this passage. In verses 7 and 8 we read:

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."¹

Matthew tells us that Herod secretly called the wise men together. This speaks so clearly of the kind of man he was. Herod did his calculating in secret because he was someone who lived a deceptive and controlling life. He did everything to serve his own agenda and his own end. He is also a man whose guile portrays him as someone who wants to worship Jesus too. They only one he wants adored is himself. So obsessed was he by his need to be in control that he was actually controlled by fear. In verse 3 we read:

³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;²

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Mt 2:7-8). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Mt 2:3). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Now the verb “frightened” while an apt descriptor of Herod’s state, does not go quite far enough in giving us the true sense of this mood. A fuller definition would be:

‘to stir up,’ to cause acute emotional distress or turbulence—‘to cause great mental distress.’

The word picture here is the stirring up of a sea or a lake because of a violent storm. The water that had been translucent is now opaque because the sediment has been stirred up.

The reason why Matthew tells us that Jerusalem was also stirred up is because Herod’s emotional state affected everyone around him. When he was troubled, his mood was like that of an uncontrollable storm that caused others to cower in his presence.

When we turn to *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens writes of Scrooge:

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.³

This description comes at the novel’s beginning. Some forty pages later Dicken’s comments:

Scrooge’s face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years; but it had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice. There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root, and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall.

He was becoming consumed by a disproportionate attachment to wealth and power and like Herod his spirit was disturbed and troubled. Greed was all for him. No care for people, except self; no satisfaction in life except to make others more miserable. A cold heart, a cold stone demeanor, as solitary as an oyster. He was someone whose influence on others that stirred up fear and trouble and left them with a chill in their own souls.

The Christ adoring Magian Spirit:

Now let’s contrast the Herodian spirit with the Christ adoring Magian spirit. In 10 we read:

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.⁴

With Herod his negative emotions controlled him because he was governed by fear. The Magi by contrast are governed by exceeding great joy. In Greek the words for grace and joy are very

³ *Dickens, Charles. A Christmas Carol (AmazonClassics Edition) (p. 2). Amazon Classics. Kindle Edition.*

⁴ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Mt 2:10). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

closely related. The New Testament teaches that those who are the recipients of grace can then be overwhelmed by joy. This results in the Wise Men bowing before Jesus and worshipping Him.

This is the main point I want to leave you with today.

People who have a controlling disposition, like Herod, will often be controlled by fear and will influence others with this same emotional disease. They will never yield to anyone, most especially not to Jesus. When we have a disposition that is always seeking to be attentive to grace, then in turn we will actively exhibit joy in how we live.

Again as we turn to Scrooge we see this expressed beautifully.

With the dawn of Christmas Day Dickens writes of the effects of Ebenezer's Christmas Eve visitors – it results in one of the most beautiful conversions in English Literature.

‘I don't know what to do!’ cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; ‘I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to every-body! A happy New Year to all the world! Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!’... ha, ha, ha,

He had frisked into the sitting-room, and was now standing there: perfectly winded.

‘Really, for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh. The father of a long, long line of brilliant laughs!’⁵

It says of the wise men they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. The same could be said of Scrooge.

Application for us:

And it is here that we come to the application of this story. As we begin 2019 how will we live the year ahead? Will it be with the dour song of Herod, or with the joy-filled carol of the wise men? In a world where there is so much that is difficult and so much that causes us reason to perhaps doubt and question God's love and goodness; it is so easy to live controlling calculating lives where we trust little and fear much. That is one way to live and many people do choose this for themselves. However, such a way causes anxiety, stress and turbulence not only for ourselves but also to those around us.

The other way to live is like the wise men and the converted Scrooge.

⁵ *Dickens, Charles. A Christmas Carol (AmazonClassics Edition) (p. 84). Amazon Classics. Kindle Edition.*

Today we are invited to realize that we all struggle with a Herodian spirit within. It is often this spirit that we need to bring to the Jesus and confess in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As we live each day of our lives we are given the opportunity to die to that which is calculating and controlling and in its place discover more abundantly the wonder of a grace shaped life. Such a life is lived not in the absence of those who would choose the way of Herod, but by intentionally avoiding to be controlled by them. Instead we are invited like the Magi to live a Christ-adoring life regardless of how those around us choose to live. Then with Scrooge may we find the voice with which to find the kind of laughter characteristic of those who can rejoice with exceeding great joy because we know that one who is the source of this joy, Jesus Christ before who we bow down and worship.