

This is a story of two kings.

The first lived in a lavish palace, and was surrounded advisors, groupies, and underlings. His domain was always growing, covering large expanses of geography from Palestine to parts of modern-day Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. He built great infrastructures – giant fortresses, harbours, waterways and theatres. The people in his kingdom called him “Herod the Great,” but the Roman authorities elsewhere in the empire simply called him the “King of the Jews.”

The second king lived in a small hill-town – a backwater – not far away. His birth in a manger drew shepherds from their flocks and angels from heaven. He was an infant, small, vulnerable, but holding within himself the potential of God’s coming reign. His family called him Jesus, but the Angel Gabriel, upon appearing to Mary, his mother, had called him the “King of the Jews.”

This is the story of two kings: one who ruled by fear, and the other by love. One who embodied tyranny, and the other, compassion. One whose leadership was based in the authority of empire, the other in the authority of God Almighty.

The Feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrate today, is a Holy Day with a number of interpretations. Ultimately, it a day when we stop and stare in wonder, gazing at the child Jesus and recognising him as God. Historically, Epiphany – the word itself means “reveal” – is tied to the appearance of the Magi, that group of strange pilgrims – maybe three, maybe more – who visited one king and then the other, deciding to worship the poor baby in the manger instead of the “Great King” in his palace.

Matthew’s gospel tells us about both kings. When the Magi from the East come to king Herod, telling him about a star rising on the horizon and the birth of an infant king, Matthew tells us that Herod was frightened. He quickly devises a plot to kill the child, asking the Magi to go find the baby and tell him where he lives. He lies to them, saying that he wishes to worship the King of the Jews. The truth is that he likes the title himself, and will go to great lengths to keep it.

The story of the Magi themselves is one that has been altered and adapted throughout history. While we know them as the figures in our nativity scenes – three men, often seen as representations of gentile communities in the East – Matthew provides no distinguishing characteristics whatsoever in the gospel. He says only that they are from the East. He does not even give us a number, only that there is more than one. They have been watching the sky and when a star appears and begins to move, they leave their communities to follow it. They enter a foreign land, looking for the Messiah whose birth is announced by this strange celestial symbol. They, like the shepherds in the field, are watchers, and with their eyes glued to the horizon they begin a long journey.

The ancient world celebrated power much in the same way that we do today. Herod’s kingship – his political authority – was confirmed and accepted not only by the Roman state but also by his own subjects. His influence was a worldly one, and both of the names that he was given – “Herod the Great” and “King of the Jews” – illustrate how truly powerful he was. He was rich. He was surrounded by smart people. He was a celebrity, a person to know. It was not only socially expected to worship Herod, but it was also an issue of life or death. Remember, this is the same king who beheaded John the Baptist.

Herod was a tyrant, and he was the very type of king that Jesus would warn about in his adult ministry. He is a symbol of the principalities and powers that the coming Reign of God is meant to subvert and destroy. He is the type of King that Mary sings about in the Magnificat, praising God for the work he has done in creating Jesus: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,” she says, “and lifted up the lowly.” The powerful in their thrones and the lowly: Herod and Jesus.

Herod is a villain of the Bible and also a villain of history. We know of his brutality, his bloodthirsty vengeance, even killing his sons, his pride. But he is the type of villain that history repeats – the dictator, the warmonger, the perpetrator of genocide. He is also a representation of the villains that our spirits battle – the sin that rivals Christ for kingship in our lives.

Ultimately, the Magi had a choice to make – a choice between two kings. The pressure to worship Herod, or at least to submit to his authority, must have been incredible, especially when the other King of the Jews turned out to be a baby born to poor parents in an occupied region of Judea.

But here is where Matthew gives us what I think is one of the most beautiful and simple verses in this entire passage. After the Magi worship the child Jesus and present him with their gifts, we are told that, “they left for their own country by another road.” They left for their own country by another road.

So powerful was that first vision of Christ – the Incarnate God that we celebrate in the Epiphany – that the Magi altered their entire course. Rather than go back to Herod – to the king whose power was affirmed by empire – they quietly chose another route, another direction for their lives. They rejected sin and embraced Christ. They did so under enormous pressure.

Our lives, too, are often populated by competing kings, principalities, and powers. The king of wealth, of pride, of popularity, of having it all together. Like Herod, they sit in their palaces and, through the influence of our culture and what it holds dear, they exert pressure on us to come and worship.

But not far away, in the hill country, another king waits in a manger. His kingship is like a breath of fresh air, an antidote to the tyranny of Herod. His kingship is one that is offered freely, lovingly, and compassionately. His reign does not control us, it liberates.

And everyday we are like the Magi, standing at a crossroad, deciding which route to take, which king to worship, how to get home.

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