

Christmas II

January 4, 2009

It's still Christmas. Surprise. It's sort of funny, really. During most of December, it's easy to grumble, whine and whimper about how difficult it is to pay attention to Advent when the whole world is already doing Christmas. But that's a snap compared to trying to celebrate Christmas when the whole world is doing clearance sales, taking down decorations and dreading the next credit card bill. (And we're all doing some of that, too.) But here we sit, still decorated on the 11th day of Christmas, while, for the world out there, the holidays were over and everything was back to business as usual by New Years'. Where did the baby Jesus go, what happened to him? What happened to the world's Christmas?

I like it when we have two Sundays after Christmas—because we get to hear today's Gospel, which gives us a pretty clear answer to that question. || What happened to the baby Jesus? We just heard. He's on the run down in Egypt or some such place, pretty well forgotten, waiting for a better time. King Herod tried to kill him, but he missed that and killed a bunch of innocent children instead. But Herod did manage to run Jesus and his family out of town. || That's what happened to the baby Jesus: that's what happened then, that's what's happening now. And it makes sense—it made sense then and it makes sense now.

Herod the Great was quite a guy. He ruled Judea for over thirty years. He was effective, clever, ruthless, cunning, murderous, obsessive, cruel, a political mastermind, somewhat mad (toward the end), and paranoid to the point of having his own children killed. But he wasn't stupid.

He knew something the world and its rulers have always known. He knew that there could only be one king at a time; he knew that there could only be one absolute ruler at a time. He intended to be that king, and he would put up with no competition. Palestine wasn't big enough for both of them, and Herod would stop at nothing to preserve his absolute rule over his turf.

So he called out the troops and went to war. Against a child. That didn't bother Herod either. He knew that children grew up, and he didn't want this one to do that. Let *that* baby out of the manger, Herod knew, and he'll start making demands. (Besides, children always suffer when kings set out to insure their power; the world just works that way.)

And it all worked fairly well back then. For the rest of Herod's life, (which, by the way, he didn't enjoy very much), Jesus was a long way away and didn't bother him. Business went on as usual; it was just as if Christmas had never happened.

Now, the story of the flight into Egypt has many levels of meaning—and Matthew doubtless included it because he was very interested in showing how Jesus, in his own life, fulfilled the ancient prophecies and re-lived the whole experience of the people of Israel. So Matthew pays a lot of attention to things like the parallel between our story today and both Joseph's the Patriarch's flight into Egypt and Israel's Exodus into the promised land. But there is more to this than some similarities with Old Testament themes. This story also talks about why Christmas cards are now on sale for half-price, and why snowmen and Valentines have replaced Bethlehem both on postage stamps and in store windows.

Just like Herod, we drive Jesus into Egypt, or someplace else far away, and we do it for pretty much the same reasons. There is still only room for one king at a time; one absolute ruler. Like Herod, we sense that it's dangerous to let this child grow up; it's dangerous to let him past infancy; it's dangerous to keep him around much after Christmas Day. So we assign Jesus to a sort of theological never-never land where he and Peter Pan can play all of the time—and never grow up.

And we get Christmas over with *fast*. By dark on December 26 half the Christmas lights on houses are turned off and both radio and TV stations are back to their usual fare. (Actually, that part's not too bad).

Like King Herod, we know that if we let this baby grow up he'll start asking hard questions, making difficult demands, and leading us into uncomfortable places. And, also like him, we want to rule absolutely.

Now, we don't have kingdoms; but we do have our turf—things like *our* future, and *our* time and *our* families, and *our* bodies, and *our* lives, and *our* money, and so on. These we want to rule, and rule absolutely. Any pretenders to our little thrones are as much a threat to us as they were to Herod. We know that if we let Jesus grow up, then our little kingdoms are under siege, our power is challenged, and our future is not our own. So we try to insure that this doesn't happen.

We don't have armies at our command—but we will muster what resources we do have, and set out to protect ourselves. These days our weapons tend to be indifference, selfishness, pride and what we call 'realism' instead of swords; but they are still pretty effective. (Ever hear anybody say "Christmas is really for children"?—That's one of our ways of keeping Jesus in never-never land.) And thus we drive him into some distant place—some out-of-sight Egypt where he won't bother us and we can continue as if Christmas never really happened. So the baby Jesus doesn't grow up; he just vanishes like a nativity set stored in an attic.

And there are casualties. The Holy Innocents, those children slaughtered by Herod as he tried to get Jesus out of his life, they're still with us. Consider this—the people we hurt, the people who suffer because of us (and we ourselves are often one of these) such people tend to be the casualties of the battles we fight to insure that *we* and no one else, are in charge of our lives, and of our turf.

Again, we are like Herod. While we can't destroy the Lord, we can ignore him—and hurt a lot of folks along the way. And we can keep him away, we can keep him in Egypt—on other roads, waiting for a time to return. We do have *that* power. Jesus will appear to wait in the exile we impose, until word arrives that he is welcome.

It's still Christmas, and we need to remember that. But we don't continue to keep Christmas if we do nothing but sit around and ogle the baby. We continue to keep Christmas by keeping Jesus around, by letting him grow up, and by paying attention to who he is, and what that means. Herod felt Jesus would cost him his kingdom. In a way Herod never understood, he was right. A part of us—and a big part of our world—fears that Jesus will cost us our little kingdoms—our absolute rule over that which we call *mine*. We are right.

To continue to keep Christmas means to surrender to this strange king who demands our lives and promises us more; who comes with neither armies nor swords, but who cannot be destroyed; and who calls us to himself with a love we cannot believe until we experience it, and which we cannot experience fully until we trust. He may be in Egypt—but at a word from us, he will come home.