

“When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.”

Throughout the Kingdom of Israel’s history, the prophets sent to the people by God taught them to hope for the Messiah. When the Assyrians conquered the northern tribes, the prophets responded that God would come to his people and deliver them through the messiah. When the Babylonians conquered the southern tribes, killed the king and his family, and then led the people of Israel into slavery; the prophets reassured the people that God was with them, that he would return them to their land, and that God would send them the Messiah.

For every Israelite living in Jerusalem, the greatest piece of news they could have received, was that the promise of the coming Messiah had been fulfilled and that a great king would soon be raised up, yet instead of rejoicing at the news of the Magi, Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled.

They are troubled because the whole world was finally thought to be at peace – *Pax Romana* – the peace of Rome – was firmly established throughout the Mediterranean, the barbarians had been defeated and the frontiers were quiet, revolts within the Empire were minimal. The people of Jerusalem lived in comfort and in peace.

Now was not the time for the Messiah to come. Now was not the time for God to visit his people. Why had he not come when the Israelites were dying in the streets of Jerusalem or when they toiled as slaves in exile? Why had God not sent the Messiah when the Temple was desecrated and burned to the ground? Why come now, why come when they were a relatively wealthy nation, when they had the favor of Rome, when they had lavish palaces, food to eat, and peace. Their thought was “Why would God send the Messiah when they had no need for the Messiah?” and so they were troubled.

The truth of the matter is that the peace that existed in Jerusalem was a false peace. It was a peace that was built on the foundation of lies. Herod wasn’t the King of the Jews as his title proclaimed – he was a puppet and tyrant, who cruelly treated his people, who ignored the rule of law he imposed on his subjects, he rewarded those who favored him and persecuted those who opposed him, and he burdened the backs of his subjects to lavish pleasure and materials goods upon himself and his court. Many people in Jerusalem were comfortable in their luxuries, but many more people in the country were suffering greatly.

Just as the citizens of Jerusalem existed within the cocoon of lies and false peace; Rome was an empire that was not at peace either, despite the illusions of peace. Rome wasn’t the benevolent ruler it pretended to be; the Romans were a cruel people and they had to be cruel and tyrannical so as to keep the nations they conquered loyal to them.

When military might couldn’t succeed in placating the people of the Empire, the Roman Government threw festivals in which thousands of slaves were massacred in their coliseums and arenas for sport, while the people cheered the bloodshed. At the same time, the Roman politicians plundered their national treasury in order to further distract the people of Rome by giving them free bread. Their politicians gave them free handouts and spared no expense in throwing their festivals all in the effort distract the people from fact that instead of doing their duty, the politicians of Rome used their office and the trust of the people to plunge into carnal and material pleasures of every sort by robbing future generations of Romans of the same opportunities which had been given them, by cutting their military and weakening the nation.

To top off their cruelty the noble families of Rome would expose their newborn babies, leaving them on their doorsteps overnight, in order to see if they were strong enough to weather the night and thus strong enough to bear the name of their father.

It is into this world, into these illusions, lies, and false comforts that the announcement of the Magi came. No other words could have shattered the illusions of the false peace which Herod and the people of Jerusalem had contented themselves into believing to be true so quickly as an announcement that a true king had been born, that the Messiah had come. Lies, immorality, cruelty, and deceit cannot stand against the one who is Truth, the one who is the Prince of Peace.

This is why Herod was troubled; he and the people were living a lie and to someone living a life of lies, nothing is more terrifying than the truth. Because he was so corrupt and cruel, instead of humbling himself by turning back to God and repenting, he sought to kill the one who threatened to expose the lie – he murdered every child born in Bethlehem in the hopes of killing the Messiah.

Today the country we live in is no different than Rome or Jerusalem. We think we have peace – the world isn't engulfed in war like it was in the early Twentieth Century. We have material comforts which Herod could never have dreamed of lavishing upon himself, flat panel TV's, computers, air conditioning, cars, our own homes, and food on our tables. Many in our nation openly admit that they have no place for Christ in their lives; they wonder why we need a savior. Why do Christians keep going to Church, hasn't that become passé?

I think deep down, our hearts are troubled. As a nation we know that the peace we experience in this country in this age is just as false as the peace of Jerusalem and the Peace of Rome. Like Rome and Jerusalem we are a nation obsessed with hedonism, materialism, and individualism, in the vain hope that material goods and pleasures can distract us from the decay around us. Like Rome our politicians have robbed our treasury in order to keep up the illusions of prosperity, to spare themselves from making any hard decisions, which might upset the people, and to bribe the people into voting for them again and we are content to keep rewarding them with reelection. Like Rome and Jerusalem we are content to ignore the misery of those around us who are poor, homeless, or hungry because we don't have enough money to facilitate the lifestyle promised to us in countless commercials and billboards. Like Rome we murder our children because they are inconvenient to our lives then cloak it under the lie of choice.

Just like in Jerusalem and just like in Rome, Christ is a threat to this false peace. To people who are content to living this lie, living in these illusions and false comforts, Christ's presence and Gospel message in our world and in our Churches is something that must be stamped out and forgotten lest the lies be revealed for the emptiness they contain, so that the immorality and indulgence can continue unadulterated, so that we can consume more and more material goods in the hopes that the emptiness might finally be filled.

Like the Magi two thousand years ago, once we have encountered Christ in our lives, we have a choice to make as a nation and as individuals. There are two roads we can take; the road back to Herod (a road paved in lies, illusions, false pleasures and comforts) or the road that leads back to our homeland. Jerusalem chose the Road of Herod and in 70 AD the city and the Temple were destroyed. The Roman Empire chose the Road of Herod, and in 410 AD, what took a thousand years to build, came crashing down in a generation when the city of Rome fell to the Visigoths. The Magi chose the Path of Truth, the Path of Life, the Way of Christ. The choice is ours to make, and I for one, choose Christ.