

Epiphany – 3rd January 2021

The Five Kings in the Christmas story

Herod the Great wasn't a bad man – he certainly didn't see himself as a pantomime villain. He has a responsible job, a delicate position balanced between the Roman overlords, the religious authorities in Jerusalem and the mixed races of Palestine – Jews, Samaritans, Galileans, Greeks, Canaanites, Phoenicians. He was doing the job as well as he could. So when three eccentric minor royals turned up at the palace in Jerusalem, how could he know that these old men were wiser than he?

Unconventional certainly, eccentric, possibly, but wise? Their revelation wasn't from an angel which Jews understood as messengers from God – but through the rising of a new star. The sign was not familiar to Herod. It sounded pagan. But what he could have recognised was the integrity of the three kings' response. They showed a genuine commitment to the revelation. They had left everything familiar to journey without knowing where they were going or what they would find at the end of it.

That act of commitment to the star involved long hard days of walking and riding through strange countryside. Only through travelling through distance and time could they actually follow where the star appeared to lead. There was no short cut possible. And according to Matthew they found their destination, offered their gifts and returned to their homes by another way. As T. S. Eliot knew, the way back is always different from the journey out, because we have been changed by the journey.

But there is a fourth king in the story – Herod. Unlike the three kings, he wasn't interested in truth, in following the light of revelation wherever it led. Herod was interested in short cuts, manipulation, placating foreign rulers and his own power. When Herod learnt what the kings were looking for, he sent them to Bethlehem 'to see this thing that has come to pass,' asking them to return to inform him so that he could root out any rival king. Herod wasn't a bad man but he was a narcissist. His response to the news of the miraculous birth was not to marvel at what it might mean for the human race, or to join the kings and journey with them to Bethlehem. Instead his gaze was on himself and the consequences of this birth for his power, his reputation and his crown. And so Herod's response to the incarnation of the God of Israel in Jesus of Nazareth was to order the massacre of all the children in the Bethlehem area.

And then there is a fifth king. The child. The revelation at his birth was not of wisdom or power. In Christ, God learns what it is like to be a baby and to grow into a child. In Christ, God experiences death and demonstrates the power of love in the resurrection. The kingly revelation at Christ's birth is of God's love revealed in vulnerability and truth.

"We do not 'possess' the truth," Pope Francis tells us in his latest book, "instead the truth possesses us, constantly attracting us by beauty and goodness."¹ In embracing what can seem to be contradictory truths and trusting in our conscience to lead us, we eventually come to see the greater light beyond us.

The kings gave up the easy comfort of their homes – gave it away when they stepped out of their door in answer to the promise of the star. They became vulnerable to the dangers of travelling, the uncertainty of geography and weather and robbers, but they stayed true to

¹ Let us dream: The path to a better future, Pope Francis, p56

their revelation. Mary and Joseph accepted life together although Mary was pregnant with a son and Joseph knew he wasn't the father. They accepted difficulty rumours and gossip because they were possessed by truth.

King Herod didn't allow himself to be attracted by the beauty and goodness of truth lying in a manger only a few miles away from Jerusalem. He did not offer himself to be possessed by truth. He lied to the wise men and unleashed death on the children of Bethlehem. But be careful! Herod wasn't a bad man – he was just a man. Any one of us could have done the same. The moment for choosing the truth comes unexpectedly. We have to practice choosing to follow our conscience, to discern truth and integrity in others, even if they are just three old men showing up at the back door of the palace asking for news.