

Epiphany

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 2 January 2022

Readings: Isaiah 60 vv 1-6 and Matthew 2 vv 1-12

Many of us will be familiar with the rituals of pantomime, even if we are no longer regular attenders or performers. Pantomime is a type of stage play that engages the audience, by encouraging either loud shouts of 'Hooray!' for the good guy, or exclamations of 'Booo!' for the obvious bad guy. Pantomimes have simple plots and simple characters who need help seeing what is right in front of them. The audience often yells things like, 'He's behind you!' in trying to warn a favourite character of something bad about to happen.

Today's gospel reading strikes some similarities to a pantomime because the characters seem to be one-dimensional. We have Herod, the obviously bad character; the wise men, who seem like unsuspecting good guys; and right in the middle of them, the focus of the conflict, an innocent little baby, with a star above the place where he sleeps. As Herod is speaking to the wise men in this passage, it might feel like watching a pantomime, with us wanting to shout, 'Watch out! He's behind you!' Or even more simply, 'Boooo!'

What makes Herod so bad? What motivates him to be this evil king? Fear. Herod is motivated by a fear which has gripped his heart. He fears that what has been prophesied about this baby will be true, and that his power will be compromised, even by a little child. This fear calls out the very worst in Herod, as it does in us. He becomes obsessed, wanting to entice the wise men to come back and tell him where this baby is.

It is curious that Herod doesn't go himself to search for the child, once he had been alerted to his birth. He could have controlled the outcome if he went on this journey himself. And yet he doesn't. Is that motivated by his fear, too? Is he so terrified of this little baby and what he might mean, the threat he might bring to the monarchy and the power of the throne, that Herod can't bring himself to go and visit an infant?

The wise men, for their part, are equally important to this story. They are called in secret (and that element of secrecy is important) by Herod and sent to Bethlehem. These three wise ones follow the star, which would mean they travelled largely in the dark. In the dark midnight skies, they walked towards Bethlehem, following this star because Herod had ordered them to do so. They finally arrived at the place where Jesus was, and they were 'overwhelmed with joy'.

When they enter the house and see Mary and Jesus, they kneel and offer him their gifts. How long did they stay there, gazing with adoration at the newborn and his mother?

At some point, the wise ones are given a dream. Is it a dream the three of them share? Or is it just one of them, with the others having to trust the insight? Either way, this dream is like the lightbulb going on. Suddenly, there is an understanding of who Herod really is. They decide to leave by a different route and go straight back to their own homes.

What allows these three visitors the wisdom to listen to this dream? Herod is motivated by fear. Maybe these three visitors are motivated by love. They have been to visit the infant Jesus, who is love incarnate. This experience has transformed their whole lives. They are no longer manipulated by an evil king; they are able to see his motivations clearly and make their own decisions about what they will do.

From this well-known story, perhaps we learn a new thing this morning by looking at what is making each character act and react as they do, as we watch the pantomime playing out before us. And that is that we need to be aware of what leads us to make the decisions that we make.

Like Herod, we can be motivated by fear: fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of change, and, at the moment, fear of the outworking of the Covid-19 pandemic. These are just some of the major fears we all face daily.

We might also be curious, as the wise ones were. Willing to go on an adventure, even though we don't know exactly what it might entail.

In this story, we are given a gift. We can come with the wise men to worship Jesus, and those forces of fear and control which have been acting upon our lives are seen for what they are. In a moment of clear vision, we can see the truth and choose to follow Love incarnate. When we make the choice to follow that Love, we are changed. We are transformed. We are overwhelmed by joy and finally, blissfully, free. Amen.