

The Epiphany of the Lord
January 6, 2019
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus' earthly life is bracketed by incidents with those who are outside the people of God, yet who have faith, and those who are part of the people of God, yet who behave faithlessly. This morning we celebrate one of those incidents, the visit to the Christ child by Wise Men from the East. And at the same time, we mourn that Herod, the temporal ruler of the Jews, tried to kill the newborn King. This same pattern is revealed at the end of the Lord's earthly life: Even as we celebrate the faith of the Gentile centurion who pierced the side of Jesus, we mourn that one of Jesus' own apostles was the one to betray the Lord of Life.

The Wise Men would have become familiar with the Scriptures because of the Jewish diaspora. Remember that after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., the leading families of Judah were taken in captivity to Babylon, in modern-day Iraq. After Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the other Jews in the Holy Land dispersed all over the known world. Jewish communities would be established in Persia, the Arabian Peninsula, and among the Assyrians, as well as many nations west of modern-day Israel. The Jews brought with them their faith, their Scriptures, and their traditions. These Gentile wise men, familiar with astronomy, would have known about the Jewish expectation that the Messiah would appear.

What is interesting is that they would make such great sacrifices to get to Judea; and on top of that, when they got there, they offered our Lord very expensive gifts. Indeed, the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, to escape the wrath of Herod, was likely financed by the gold the Wise Men gave to honor Jesus. So here were people who were not Jewish coming to give honor and praise to the Jewish Messiah.

They assumed wrongly that all the Jewish leaders would be as gleeful as they were that the Messiah had finally come. So, naturally, they approach the Jewish authorities, and Herod became aware that a potential rival King had been born. Herod, rather than celebrating and worshiping as he told the Wise Men he would, use the information they brought to try to kill the Savior of the world.

How amazing, then, that we see a similar outworking when Jesus' earthly walk was over. Judas, who had been present at the Sermon on the Mount and had heard Jesus predict his own Passion and Resurrection from the dead, chose to help the authorities who wanted to kill Him. Moreover, his betrayal, the betrayal of one of the original twelve bishops, was sealed with a kiss. His counterpart is St. Longinus, the centurion who pierced Jesus' side and then exclaimed, "Truly, this was the Son of God" (Mt. 27:54). So while one of Jesus' own apostles betrayed Him, another Gentile, one of the very men who actually nailed Jesus to the tree, comes to faith in Jesus Christ. In both instances, the leaders from among the Chosen People fail. And the Gentiles, those outside the Faith, prove themselves faithful.

One message, of course, is that some of the gravest threats to the integrity of the Body of Christ come from within her own ranks. We generally are looking for outside threats, but Judas and Herod surprise us because they came from the inside. We have seen this reality manifest itself over the past year, as the abusive behavior of too many clergy has been a graver threat to the health and welfare of the Church than

are the incessant attacks of those outside the fold. Yes, the Romans killed Jesus, but they could not have done it without help from within the Lord's inner circle.

Knowing that some within the Church are working to destroy the faith of the faithful, how do we distinguish friend from foe? How do we see that Herod doesn't really want to worship, but wants to kill? How do we see that the kiss of Judas is the kiss of death rather than the kiss of peace? The Wise Men point the way. Their faithfulness was reflected in their extreme sacrifice. Herod said, "You go do all the work, the searching and the finding, and then I too will worship." Note the contrast. The threat to Jesus is he who wants all the benefit but without the work, the responsibility, the sacrifice. We should be suspicious of those who talk a lot about their faith in Christ, but don't actually do anything that demonstrates faith in Christ. We should be suspicious of those who put anything on the line in their walk with the Lord.

Another message from these twin incidents is that people outside the Church continue to be drawn to the Light. Just as one of Jesus' executioners is now a saint in the Church, so people who have spent their lives crucifying the Lord come in droves to shelter in the Church. Last week we were blessed to be joined at Mass by a young woman who until just two years ago was part of a sedevacantist sect, part of those who claim we've had no pope since 1958. When (Why?) did she decide to be reconciled to Holy Mother Church—while countless members of the Body of Christ work feverishly to weaken, discredit, and undermine her authority? The Truth is still compelling, no matter how many Herods and Judases try with all their might to kill Jesus.

We should be looking, therefore, for the people God will send us as the Church navigates her current crisis. The glory of Jesus Christ continues to shine forth from the house where the Gentile Wise Men found the infant Messiah. We should expect that however Herod should try to tear that house down, the light will still bring those who have precious gifts to offer our Lord Jesus. And they will make great sacrifices to bring those gifts before His throne.

So we do not lose heart. Yes, there are Herods and Judases in the Church—but they are being revealed as such, just as the Lord warned the Wise Men not to go back to Herod. The Lord is giving us the same warnings. As powerful as these shocks have been to the Church, the Lord is showing Himself to be more powerful, separating the wheat from the chaff and helping us to see clearly Herod and the Wise Men, Judas and Longinus for who they are. If you don't know what you're dealing with, ask God; and before too long, you'll know if we're seeing someone who will die for Jesus or if we have before us someone who wants Jesus to die.