

December 29, 2019 The Hunted Messiah Homily: One evening, several years ago, I saw Hal Roach, a legendary Irish comedian give a performance at the Troy Music Hall. To this day, I have a vivid memory of a humorous story he shared with his audience. Please let me share it with you. A young boy submitted his homework, a drawing of the Holy Family, to his religion teacher. The teacher was quite impressed with the boy's artwork, but could not fail to detect one, single minor flaw. "Why is there a dot in the center of the drawing", he asked. "It is not a dot; it is a flea", was the young student's reply. The teacher was understandably puzzled "A flea, but why?" The boy then defended himself. "Well, it can be found in the bible." "Please show me the passage in the bible in which a flea is mentioned," he asked. "It is in the second chapter of Matthew's gospel," the boy replied. "Recall the words of the angel: 'Rise, take the child and his mother and flea to Egypt.'"

Over a half century ago a Jesuit scholastic studying for the priesthood, was obliged to read a spiritual classic dating back to the sixteenth century: "Autobiography of a Hunted Priest" by John Gerard, a Jesuit priest. This courageous priest kept the Catholic faith alive in England at a time when to be a Catholic priest was considered traitorous by an official act of the English Parliament. Very often he ministered under cover of darkness in order to avoid capture. Wealthy Catholic patrons provided him with shelter, often exposing themselves to grave danger. Fr. Gerard and other Catholic priests hid in a secret place called a "priest's hole". Sometime later, he was betrayed by a family friend and languished in the infamous Tower of London for six months, where he was subjected to hideous torture. Eventually he escaped.

In today's gospel reading, St. Matthew the Evangelist gives his readers an account of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. The long awaited King-Messiah is a hunted child. There are few words as chilling as those in Matthew's second chapter. "Herod is going to search for the child to destroy Him." (Mt. 2:13) The news of Christ's impending birth left him perturbed. (Mt. 2:2) The savior's birth inspired in him rage and not joy. King Herod ranks as one of the truly tragic figures of the bible. A ruthless and cruel tyrant, he thought only in terms of power. He showed no mercy to his enemies. He even had three of his own sons executed because he considered them a threat to his absolute power. His manic obsession with his rule was known throughout the Roman Empire. The Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus is said to have quipped, "I prefer to be one of Herod's dogs than one of his sons". He is perhaps best remembered by Christians for ordering the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two. The Church honors them as "the Holy Innocents".

"When Herod had died....." (Mt. 2:19). This simple phrase speaks simply, though eloquently, of the tragic folly and utter futility of man's rebellion against God. All the tyrants of the world must die. Those who deprive Christians of their fundamental civil rights, persecute and even kill them for their Christian faith, must exit this earthly life. The divine plan cannot be thwarted or foiled by the unholy powers of this world. All the tyrants of the last century are dead, and never to return to haunt Christians: Pol Pot, Stalin, Hitler, Lenin, Chairman Mao and many others. The Church lives another day!

If you read today's gospel prayerfully, you cannot fail to notice the providential hand of God at work. "When they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you.'" (Mt. 2:13) One Benedictine

scholar has noted, "Like all other families on this earth, the Holy Family experienced its own special situations, difficulties and anxieties. It was burdened with trials and subjected to the winds of fortune: an emperor's edict forced the virgin, about to give birth, to leave for Bethlehem, where she laid her newborn son in a manger; a king's cruelty forced Mary, Joseph and the child to flee to Egypt; fear of Herod's successor made them settle in Nazareth of Galilee. Throughout all this, they placed themselves in the hands of Providence, subject to the will of God, who frequently revealed it to their eyes of faith."

On this feast of the Holy Family, we would do well to reflect on the mystery of God's plan for each one of us. As that plan unfolds in the course of our life, we may discern God's invisible, sheltering hands at work. Let us hope that our faith is strengthened by his presence and that we imitate the wonderful example of the Holy Family.

Amen!