

I am a great fan of podcasts. For those of you unfamiliar with them, it is like having radio programmes on demand. Whatever your interests - comedy, history, religion, culture, science, sport – there will be a plethora of podcasts to cater to them. I enjoy listening to them while driving or while falling asleep at night. Podcasts about Jane Austen or Tudor monarchs or the science of space. I am a bit of a geek.

This week, I discovered a new podcast. Called “Real Dictators”, and drawing on expertise from academic historians, it tells the stories of people like Idi Amin, Colonel Gaddafi, Franco, Lenin, Pinochet, Robert Mugabe, Adolf Hitler – and Herod the Great. Herod was not simply a villain in the nativity story – he was a significant historical figure. From a variety of sources, we actually know a remarkable amount about Herod. He was a skilled warrior, a wily politician and a tenacious survivor. His family led a state called Idumea which neighboured Palestine and sat between the two superpowers of their day – the Romans and the Parthians. As a result, Idumea had real strategic importance for trade. Herod’s father threw in his lot with the Romans, and educated his sons in the Greek style – Herod’s name was a derivative of the Greek word for Hero. Then his father set about establishing them as the leaders of wider Judea. It was a gruesome and bloody project, which saw Herod’s father poisoned, his brothers killed and Herod himself on the run. He sought support from Cleopatra initially, but when her terms were not good, he set off across the Mediterranean to Rome. There, Mark Antony and Octavius, who would later become the Emperor Augustus, recognised a man they could work with – ruthless and efficient. He was appointed King of Judea – a client king of the Roman empire.

However, he could only be King once he controlled the land, and what followed was a ferocious civil war that lasted almost three years and culminated in the siege and utter destruction of Jerusalem. Herod, with the support of Roman legions, won. He had the title, he had the land – and then he spent the next three decades ensuring he held on to them. There was nothing he would not sacrifice to that end. He killed his brother-in-law, his wife and even two of his sons. Like a 1<sup>st</sup> century Henry the Eighth, he became known for his womanising and his paranoia.

He also completed a remarkable number of building projects: including a new port city and the building of the Great Temple. He was the longest surviving of all Rome's client Kings, a true servant of the empire, maintaining a form of peace that allowed their trade and supplied their taxes. His people, however, celebrated when he died.

In summarising his legacy, one of the academic experts on the podcast said: He was a wily old operator. Another said, "In Herod's world, you win or you die – it's like the Game of Thrones". But one of the comments that most stuck with me was something that one of them said about Herod during his long battle for power. She said "He was not afraid of danger – what scared him most was obscurity".

In the Christian tradition – and in popular culture - Herod is most remembered for the massacre of the innocents. The Gospel of Matthew is the only evidence we have this took place, and some have questioned its veracity. However, the podcast experts saw this massacre as being of a piece with all the other atrocities Herod and his successors committed without turning a hair. It may not have been recorded because the slaughter of a handful of toddlers in a small Judean village was simply not that newsworthy. It definitely fitted with Herod's utter inability to cope with any form of competition or threat to the security of his throne. And this chilling tale has become a literary trope over the past two millenia, with villains from Shakespeare's Macbeth to Harry Potter's Lord Voldemort modelled on this original bad guy.

Herod feared obscurity and feared losing his throne. Earlier in this story – in the portion of scripture which precedes today's gospel - we hear more of Herod's fear. When the Magi arrive seeking the infant Jesus, Herod is frightened, disturbed afraid – and all the city with him. People who live under tyrants learn to fear them being afraid. It rarely ends well. And this rumour of a tiny baby born King of the Jews is exactly what makes Herod afraid – any threat to his throne, to his power, to his legacy, however small and vulnerable, must be snuffed out. And if that costs a few Bethlehem some families unimaginable heartache and grief, well so be it.

In the two thousand years since, there have been no shortage of Herods. People for whom the ends justify the means. People who are happy for others to suffer in the service of their own strength and security. People for whom the bottom line is measured in dollars or pounds or euros and not in human fulfilment. People for whom almost anything and anyone is expendable as they build their powerbase. And others back them and others vote for them and others follow them because they are what they believe they need – a strong leader, and usually a strong man. And if that strong leader targets other people, well that's a shame, but so long as they look after me and my priorities...

It is at this point that I am reminded of that famous poem by Martin Niemöller:

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Communist... you know the rest!

Be very careful, my friends. Be very careful. It can happen again.

But in this gospel, we have an alternative to that strong leader, that strong man. We have Joseph. I couldn't find a mainstream podcast about Joseph. He wasn't a warrior or a politician. He didn't hobnob with Roman legends or build enormous temples. As Nitano reminded us last week, Joseph says nothing, absolutely nothing, in his appearance in the Gospels. What we do know about Joseph is small but significant. We know that Joseph tries to do the right thing – when he finds his fiancée is pregnant, he doesn't want to humiliate her or put her in danger. We know that he is faithful to God – when God speaks to him in a dream and explains what he wants Joseph to do it, he does it no matter what it costs. He does not put himself at the centre, but recognises that his role is to serve and care for this little family God has entrusted to him.

One thing which Joseph and Herod have in common is that they both know fear. In our Gospel today, Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt. Fleeing is not a neutral word – it is a desperate, fearful one. And when Herod dies and it is finally time to return to Judea, he is afraid to return to a place ruled by Herod's equally violent son, so they make their

home in Nazareth. Joseph knows fear, but his fear does not make him selfish or vicious. It drives him to care for others, to be wise and follow God's guidance.

After this story, we hear of Joseph one more time in Luke's Gospel. Again he is fearful and frantic as he and Mary search Jerusalem for their missing, almost-teenaged son. Being Jesus' earthly father has not been an easy calling for him. He lives in the shadow of his wife and son. And yet, Jesus pays him the greatest tribute of all, because when Jesus has to find a way to help his followers to understand what God is like, he tells them to call God Abba – Dad.

One of my favourite Christmas poems is I am Joseph by UA Fanthorpe:

I am Joseph, carpenter,  
Of David's kingly line,  
I wanted an heir; discovered  
My wife's son wasn't mine.

I am an obstinate lover,  
Loved Mary for better or worse.  
Wouldn't stop loving when I found  
Someone Else came first.

Mine was the likeness I hoped for  
When the first-born man-child came.  
But nothing of him was me. I couldn't  
Even choose his name.

I am Joseph, who wanted  
To teach my own boy how to live.  
My lesson for my foster son:  
Endure. love. give.

In Joseph, we see a different sort of manhood to Herod, a different version of masculinity. It is less spectacular, less secure, but it embodies a truer and deeper strength. In the courage, unselfishness, goodness, faithfulness and love of Joseph, we catch a glimpse of the ministry

his foster son will live out. God knew what God was doing when Joseph was called to be Jesus' Dad. Over the years, I have come to truly admire this silent dreamer who loves enough to put himself at the service of his wife and child. Herod's name may mean hero, but Joseph is the hero of this tale.

I think we should celebrate Joseph more – perhaps it will teach us to recognise and celebrate the Joseph's in our midst today. We are not so good at that. We are much more likely to celebrate the Herods – we buy newspapers about them, watch television programmes about them, listen to podcasts about them... Sometimes we even vote for them. How different would the world be if we valued our Josephs?

Perhaps as this year draws to a close, this might be our resolution for the new one. In a world damaged and divided by Herods, may we see, celebrate and support the Josephs. May we even perhaps be one. Maybe then, we too will find ourselves part of God's story of hope and salvation as that first Joseph was.