

Herod & Son

This morning I want to speak to you about man called Herod. He wasn't just a random person he was a king actually. When people read the Bible, in the New Testament, many think that there's only one Herod who gets a mention, but actually there are two. The first was called Herod the Great, and the second was one of his sons, a man called Herod Antipas.

Herod the Great is the man we read about in the Christmas story. Herod Antipas is the man we read about when it comes to the beheading of John the Baptist. There's only a gap of about thirty years between the two events, so it's easy to see why people get confused and assume that the Bible is talking about the same person ... but it's not.

The title of the sermon this morning is Herod & Son, referring to that relationship, but although I was planning to speak about both, because of the way this fits into the rest of the programme, especially the passage that Dave is going to be speaking from next week, I've decided to concentrate just on the first Herod this morning. If I get another opportunity to speak over the coming months, we might be able to look at the second Herod then.

If you have a Bible, please turn with me to Matthew chapter two, and we'll read some familiar words from the Christmas story together.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

The Bible is endlessly fascinating, yeah? It's the world's number one bestseller. If it's become like a dry and dusty theology book, then there is something wrong. What you're holding in your hand, or reading up here on the screen, is God's eternal word, and there's power in that word. This morning, through the story of king Herod, I want to speak to you about power.

On 18 May 1980, Mt. St Helens in the cascade range of Washington exploded. That's a long time ago, but do some of you remember that? It caused a big dust cloud that blotted out the sun for a long time. That explosion was one of the most visible indications of the power of nature the modern world has ever seen. At 8:32 that morning, in less than two seconds, the explosion took 1,300 foot off the top of the mountain. Sixty people were killed by a blast of 300 degree heat, travelling at 200 miles per hour. Some of those who died were as far as 16 miles away, and the force of the explosion toppled many of the 150 foot Douglas fir trees in

the surrounding area, destroying enough timber to build 200,000 homes. Wow ... that's quite some power, yeah? One explosion ... two seconds ... and utter devastation.

Did you know the common flea can jump 130 times its own height? That's power. The most venomous snake in the world, the sea snake, carries enough venom to kill 300 sheep. That's power. In the 1956 Olympics, American weightlifter Paul Anderson back lifted 6,270 pounds. That's power. Just the word has an edge to it doesn't it? You're all listening to me because I'm talking about power ... I haven't even got to the Bible bit yet! Power attracts every human being, it magnetises people. The dictionary defines power as the ability to act or do, to have strength, command or authority. Simply defined, power is the ability to obtain resources and secure your own destiny. Above anything else in the world, people want power.

You may say "that's not right Graham ... people would sooner have money". Yeah? That's not so. Every human being wants power. Even above money, even above riches. People only want money for the power that it gives them ... to buy what they want, where they want, when they want and for whom they want. The things that money can buy are merely incidental ... it's the power to buy them that people are really after, so they can be in control of their own destiny ... no limits, no budgets, no constraints. They don't want to rely on wages or benefits, savings, loans or handouts ... they want to be in control of their own finances, their own life. They want power. Power magnetises the human soul.

So when you think about power in that way, of all the words that have ever been written about the subject, none of them seem more puzzling than the ones we find here in Matthew 2. Really, this is a story of two kings, one of them called Herod and the other called Jesus. In all of history, never have two men been more diametrically opposed. Their claim to kingship was the only thing they had in common, but the most striking contrast is the way they managed power. Herod the Great and Jesus Christ, Son of God.

The story begins in the most absurd way. Herod the Great was king of Judea, the southern part of Israel, and he starts getting concerned because he's just heard that a baby has been born somewhere nearby, who was going to become the king of the Jews. If there's one thing that Herod hated more than anything else in the world, it was a rival ... even if that rival was only a baby. Herod would do anything to defeat a rival, anything to avoid losing his grip on power. That's the context of this story.

He decides to come up with a plan, so at first, he tries deception. He says to the Magi, "well, when you find him, let me know too, and I'll come down and worship this king with you" ... but his attempts at deception, as we all know, didn't work. Herod becomes furious ... like a man possessed, consumed with rage ... so he orders the execution of every male child under two years of age. Bethlehem is about five miles from Jerusalem; you can walk there in less than an hour, but Herod doesn't just order the execution of the babies in Bethlehem ... he wants the soldiers to kill all the baby boys in the surrounding areas too, he's that mad.

Actually, as horrific and outrageous as that seems, it probably came as no surprise. Everyone knew what Herod was like ... he had a track record; he was addicted to power. In 73BC, he was born into a politically well-connected family, and his father was also a king. When he was 30 years old his father was killed; poisoned by a political opponent, so Herod's obsession with power was also tinged with a dangerous fervour for revenge. On the day his father died, something snapped in Herod's mind, and he began to see just how vulnerable political leaders could be. It became a turning point in his life.

Seething with anger, and with a desire for revenge, Herod formulated a plan. He invited his father's killers to come over to the palace for a dinner party. I can't believe they were stupid enough to go really, but they did, and it just so happened that the people stood outside the palace gate waiting to greet them were hitmen. So Herod had them massacred ... every single one of them. According to the history books he slept well that night, because Herod was never particularly prone to remorse. From that moment on, he made a calculated decision that no kind of secret ingredients were ever going to find their way into his soup. Nobody was going to poison him ... nobody was going to take away his grip on power.

His life from there onwards revolved around covering all the bases. For him, the only way was up. That's a song I think, isn't it? It could have been Herod's theme tune. Whatever it took, whether blackmail, extortion, beatings, murder, execution or just sheer brutality, Herod would do it to continue his journey upwards and keep tight hold of his grip on power. But brute force wasn't his only tactic ... Herod was smart too, and he understood that sometimes you needed to take a more diplomatic approach. He set up a food distribution programme when there was a famine in Jerusalem, and bankrolled huge construction programmes; it was Herod the Great who built the temple that took over sixty years to complete ... it wasn't from his own money mind, he got other people to pay for stuff as well, but he was the mastermind behind it.

Another of his projects was to run a water line from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Even today, if you drive down the coast towards Jerusalem, you can still see the aqueduct that Herod built. He had water piped straight from the coast, all the way up to the city of Jerusalem. Sounds good that doesn't it? But Herod wasn't really interested in the projects or the people, he was just smart enough to realise that loyalty could be bought. He served himself by serving others. Herod knew that to obtain power, he needed to get close to its sources, so he built a state of the art harbour in Israel, and named it after his boss – Caesarea – that's great isn't it? Just imagine how Caesar felt about that!

By getting pally with all the right people, Herod gained himself powerful contacts and allies in Rome. Having powerful contacts meant more power for him you see ... with Herod, there was always a hidden agenda. He married ten times and several of his marriages were for political reasons too ... there wasn't anything Herod wouldn't do in his conquest for moving up. Herod was addicted to power. The only thing stronger than his obsession with moving up was his dread of moving down. That's what drove the man that we read about here in Matthew 2.

Herod devoted enormous energy to protecting himself. He had a network of thousands of spies so that nothing escaped his attention. Any threat was immediately dealt with, and as an extra defence, he built himself twelve fortresses too. Doesn't that tell you what's going on in his mind? He wants to have ultimate power, but he's plagued with fear. It sounds like many 'celebs' we hear about even today ... surrounded by fame and riches, living the millionaire lifestyle, but desperately insecure. A few years later, Herod became so obsessed with power that he ordered the execution of two of his wives and three of his sons. The execution of his last son was ordered with his dying breath. What a picture!

Let me say this though; Herod lived at the very least, a consistent life. He carried within him a simple philosophy ... me, me, me ... never last, always first ... me, myself and I. For the most part, it worked pretty well ... Herod ruled Judea for more than thirty years, until the time of Jesus, but friends, anyone who has an encounter with Jesus can never be the same again, and **that's** the point of this particular story.

When Jesus came into the world he was the very antithesis of Herod; no two people could have been more diametrically opposed. Jesus was born in a cave to a teenage mother married to a poor carpenter. He began his life in the most humble of circumstances, surrounded by a few animals ... no palace, no servants, no midwife ... just straw and a wooden feeding trough. He was the king of the universe, not just the king of Judea, but Jesus left his kingly power behind in heaven and he stepped down. You see, for Jesus, the only way was down.

To say that Herod and Jesus crossed paths would be an understatement. It was more like a collision of two worlds, of two kingdoms. Both of them possessed immense power, but how they chose to use it revealed the heart of two radically different men ... the first was bent on promotion, the other was bent in devotion. The first was a tyrant, the other was a servant. The first was consumed by self-interest; the other was focussed on God and putting other people before himself. The first manipulated, coerced, deceived and killed, the other touched, shared, healed and loved. The contrast couldn't have been any greater.

When it came to managing their power, Herod and Jesus shared only one thing in common ... they both believed there was nothing that bloodshed couldn't resolve. For Herod, that meant anyone else's blood. For Jesus, that meant his own blood, and his blood alone.

As soon as Herod heard of Jesus' birth, he wanted him dead. He summoned his soldiers, and on the face of it, there seemed no contest at all. Nobody messed with king Herod and kept his head. Never in history was a battle between two kings so apparently unequal ... Herod with money and power and armies, Jesus a baby, cradled in his mothers arms, sheltering in a cave. Herod gave the command and the soldiers rode the five miles to Bethlehem and all the male babies under two years of age were put to death. It's almost beyond belief isn't it? But Jesus wasn't there ... he was being carried in Mary and Josephs arms, safely to Egypt.

Herod and Jesus, two kings who represent the only two kingdoms in the universe; the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light ... the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of hell. Every person who's ever lived, including every person in this room today, stands behind one of those kings. Maybe you're thinking "that's a bit much Graham ... no way am I like Herod, I'm not a maniac, he was insane ... I mightn't be perfect but I don't go round killing wives, sons or babies!" Well, perhaps not ... in fact I really hope not ... but the Bible says that we're all sinful.

Just a few months after the massacre of those babies, Herod developed a serious disease; it was a terminal illness. His pain was so bad that his screams could be heard all over the palace at night, a fact that's been well recorded in the history books. It was more than physical pain though; Herod the Great brooded over the fact that his death would be mourned by so few, and he wanted tears at the moment of his death ... lots of tears.

So Herod hatched one final desperate plan. He would bring all of the leaders of Israel together for a summit meeting in Jericho, and once they arrived, he would order the gates to be locked. Then, at the moment of his death, he would have them massacred too. One way or another, tears would flow at the death of Herod the Great, he wanted to make sure about that. But the plan backfired, the leaders escaped, and Herod died alone. Nobody wept, and Herod the Great has remained despised for the rest of history.

Jesus Christ, after a life of poverty, was nailed to a cross. His cries also pierced the darkness, and he too died. But there's a critical difference between the death of Herod and the death of Jesus ... for all of his power, Herod couldn't save himself. Jesus could have done, but he chose not to. They took Herods' body, placed it in a grave, and it rotted. They took Jesus body, placed it in a tomb, and three days his father resurrected him, just as Jesus said he would.

Even with all the power in the world, nobody else has ever been able to do that ... and so we're left with a decision to be made. Which of these kings are **you** going to stand behind, and in whose kingdom would you rather be?