

Holy Monday: Herod Antipas

Luke 23.1-12

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

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The message arrives while he is at the old Hasmonean palace, built one hundred years earlier by the former kings of Judah. Located near the Temple, it's a convenient base when he comes south from Galilee for the festivals – as he has for this Passover. But mainly this residence stirs resentment. By family right, he should be in his father's palace in the upper city – the most impressive building in the whole of Jerusalem, besides his father's principal construction, the Temple itself. He remembers the fruitful gardens, the slim canals that watered the trees and cooled the air, the bronze fountains, the baths and porticoes and banqueting halls. His throat is parched by the memory. Now it's the official seat of that foreign upstart Pontius Pilate, who is fond of reminding Herod that he governs his Galileean backwater only on the condition of imperial approval.

The slave's announcement that Pilate is sending him a judicial case – the man is accused of claiming to be a king – is therefore unexpected. A prank to deride Herod's historical claim to the kingship of Judah? That's not usually Pilate's style. For all his pretensions, his politics is rather more straightforward. Tell it how it is, administer a flogging, case closed. More likely, then, he's shifting some trivial business off his desk – the secret of all effective administrators. But it creates a dilemma for Herod. Accept the case and he positions himself as Pilate's subordinate, happy to take whatever is thrown his way; but in the unlikely event that Pilate treats these accusations seriously, it may be some kind of test, and to dismiss them would run the greater risk of agitating his occupier's insecurity.

He does not hide his surprise very well when the guards enter the room and introduce their captive as one Jesus of Nazareth. Herod has been curious about this man for some years, but hitherto has received not even a glimpse of this talk-about wanderer. Jesus seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, like a fox who one moment will confront you in the street in broad daylight and the next confine himself to shadows. How peculiar, therefore, that this creature should be brought directly to him for examination – you might say, providential.

As Jesus stands before him, he recalls that strange visit of the eastern travellers to his father Herod the Great so long ago and a passion stirs within him – whether of fascination or fear, he cannot tell. He, like everyone else, has heard the rumours of miracles and healings and desired to witness them, though he does not know if he would believe or belittle. What he does know is that people of Jesus' sort – so-called prophets, breakaway teachers, rabble-rousers and general nonconformists – tend to get under the Romans skin, and so, as long as they refrain from criticising him (which could not be said about all those loincloth-wearers), he has no qualms about keeping their bridle on the loose end.

Fixing his gaze on Jesus' face, he sees the weary resignation of the captive. The same you see the world over in prisoners, refugees, the homeless, the poor. Though here he notices a degree of assurance too, which gently questions the finality of his custody. For some reason it infuriates him, that confident tranquility – the kind of conviction borne by the children of Roman aristocrats, who know that whatever trouble they run into, father's got their back. Momentarily, he forgets the charges on which Jesus has been brought to him and thrusts with his own sharp tongue:

You are here for the Passover, I assume?

...

How much credence should I give this gossip about your so-called miracles?

...

How many people have you healed?

...

What is it about your teaching that interests so many?

...

By all accounts, you spend your time with thoroughly disreputable characters. Why is that?

...

I expect you heard about what I did to John the Baptist – your cousin, was he not?

The stupidity of Jesus' silence causes Herod to turn with sympathy to the chief priests and scribes, who raise their allegations once again. But Jesus does not reply to them either, and the foolishness of this charade becomes apparent. That this mute could be a monarch in disguise is such a fanciful notion that it might have come from a Greek myth. These are men who are supposed to understand the Scriptures, and here they are indulging in Gentile story-telling.

He'll make it clear who tells the story here, and madly he orders: *Bring me the purple robe – the one my father wore – and I will vest this king in garb that befits his hidden royalty.* The slaves do as he requests and Herod's soldiers begin to chant in fake solemnity, as at a coronation. Yet as Herod binds the robe around Jesus' shoulders, it flickers across his mind that he might have done something – what is it – irreversible? As if he has cast his authority into the abyss. No king can robe another king.

He strikes the thought aside and gives instructions for the man to be returned to Pilate. Somehow his enmity for Pilate has been pacified by this affair. Herod's is a lonely life and this asinine ordeal endured by both of them establishes a kind of sympathy. For who can really understand what it is like to be a true king, except another? So what if the price of such knowledge is one man's trauma. He should think of it as a service, a benefit perhaps, that he has offered the powers above to establish peace where there was none before.

The soldiers continue to chant as they lead the captive back to Pilate. Now they are singing the royal psalms, which in days of old were used at the accessions of the kings of Judah. Does Herod hear they begin Psalm 2?

*Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and his anointed...*