

They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.'
Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an
angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms
and died.' Acts 12.22-23.

There was some interesting politics going on here, 2,000 years ago in Roman Palestine. Nothing much changes, does it? The people of Tyre and Sidon on the coast had been quarrelling with King Herod Agrippa, but he held the keys to the food supplies in Galilee, the bread-basket. It was either make up with Herod or starve - not much of a choice. So they got the support of Herod's chamberlain called Blastus, and then met the king to eat humble pie and do some grovelling, vv19b-20...

The grovelling went so over the top that the desperate people were even calling Herod a 'god'!, v21... Herod lapped it up, and had no desire to contradict them. But he had overreached himself. We read here in Acts 12 that he was suddenly struck down and then died, v23... I wonder what you're thinking now. A bit far fetched? Fairy tale? Well, let me tell you that the Bible isn't into lies. This is a book you can rely on, for God is the God of truth. Josephus was a very famous Jewish historian who lived at the same time as Acts. He despised Christians but he records in his *Antiquities of the Jews* this very story of the grovellers coming to Herod, calling him a god, and of him being struck down dead.

OK, it's a great story, and it's clearly a true story, backed up by a hostile witness. But does it have anything to say to us today? The sad reality, as we know from history and our own experience, is that Herod was not alone in fancying he was God Almighty. In fact, most of the world's evils come from people thinking they're God Almighty.

You've all heard of that once fashionable slogan 'God is dead'. Once people stop believing in God, they don't stop believing in gods. Go right back to the beginning if the Bible, to *Genesis*, and you find the famous story of Adam and Eve being tempted by the serpent. He tempts them to defy God's order not to eat the fruit of the tree, for then, said the serpent, 'You shall be as gods'. Why later in *Genesis* did humans build the Tower of Babel up to heaven? It was to be on a level with God. We stop believing in God so we can be god.

Now we've all heard of mad scientists who 'play at God', as the saying goes: GM crops, designer babies, stem-cell research, hybrid embryos. There may be shrill, arrogant scientists like Richard Dawkins, but there are many scientists who bow their heads in humility and awe before the mystery and unknowableness of Creation. But it goes far deeper than this.

Herod, the head of state, thought he was god. But many people today don't realise that we are now living in a land where the State thinks it is god. I used to think that the only totalitarian states were places like Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia. We in GB used to pride ourselves on the fact that the State existed for us, not we for the State. But not now. You exist for the State, and you will do what you are told, and you will think what you are told. Only last week we heard how Prince Harry is to be sent on an equality course to get his mind right because he once stupidly made a racist remark. So now even Princes of the Realm are forced to think the way the State says we ought to think.

Only last week the Court of Appeal ruled that children

cannot be returned to their real parents even after a proven miscarriage of justice. So the State can snatch your children away, and it's up to *you* to prove you're innocent. The State now forbids a nurse to offer prayer for a patient. A foster parent who has fostered 80 children is struck off the list because one of her teenagers, a Muslim, converts to Christ. That's diversity, British-style, for everyone but Christians.

PC is what the State permits you to say and think. We have now the nanny state, and state officials who bug us with CCTVs and cameras even in our wheelie bins. And you think that Herod imagining he was God is irrelevant? He's still alive!

Our modern way of thinking stems from a movement known as the Enlightenment, with philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau in the 18thC. Their key idea was 'the sovereignty of the individual'. The consumer is king. You, the individual, are god in your little world. So throw off the external shackles of law, convention, religion, parents, teachers, priests. You're *free*! You're not accountable to anyone but yourself, nor are you subject to any absolute truth. Just be true to yourself. It's *your* truth, and *my* truth. Now that's all very dandy, but you just end up with millions of little selfish people, all thinking they're god, doing whatever they want, because 'No-one's going to tell me what to do.'

So I'll abandon my children, because the only one who counts here is me. My wants and needs are supreme. It must be great to be god. You're never wrong. It's never your fault. You can drive your car like a madman, because your needs are far more important than anyone else's on the road.

I've been thinking about those dreadful Australian fires in Victoria. What possesses arsonists to do this? It's because they think they're god. Causing such raging fires and killing people gives them a sense of unbelievable power. And anyway, why shouldn't they? So long as they get their kick? Their needs, however perverted, are all that count.

So, absolutist states with totalitarian powers, and individuals who think they're God Almighty and can do whatever they like. But this is the road to destruction. The throne is for *God*, and not for man. I know that terrible things are done in the name of religion, but they are in clear defiance of scripture. Jesus told us to put away our swords and to live a life of love. The act of coming to church is the crucial acknowledgement that *God* is on the throne, not us. Worship is an act of humility. *He* is the creator, and we are mere creatures. It's strange, isn't it? that the rise of totalitarian states, murderous ideologies, and the elevation of the individual arose once people stopped believing in God. Once we stopped believing in God, we made *ourselves* God. And just look at the mess we've made of everything.

Only Jesus is Lord. That's why the authorities 2000 years ago had him murdered. *They* wanted to be lord. Our state today persecutes Christians, because *it* wants to be lord/in charge. Individuals reject Christ and Church as piffle. Why? Because they want to be free to do what they want. But who is really controlling events? Herod thought he was. He was struck down, *but* (that beautiful word of hope in v24), '*but* the word of God *increased and spread*'. Take heart; God is on the throne.