

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. Acts 12.1

There's nothing sadder than coming across ministers who have been preaching for years who confess that they have run out of things to say. Every week they desperately scratch their head; 'what on earth shall I preach on next Sunday?' Many people ask me if I have problems finding things to say after nearly thirty years of ministry. 'No,' is my reply. 'I simply go the next passage in the book of the Bible we're studying to see what the Holy Spirit wants to say to us'. I'm sorry to say that ministers only have problems once they cease preaching from the Bible and letting God's Word lead them.

Take this morning, for instance. After that marvellous Nativity Service last Sunday, what should I preach on today? Well, I just opened my Bible at *Acts*, and looked at the next passage. And lo and behold, it's all about King Herod. How about that for a perfect passage of scripture for Christmas? That's a good warning to all of you. If you let yourself be led by the Holy Spirit rather than trying to work out your own future, you will be amazed where life will take you. Let *God* into your life; let *him* set your future. Be led by the Spirit.

As I said, *Acts* 12 begins with King Herod, and the name of Herod is notorious from the gospel account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Of course, *this* King Herod is not the same as the wicked King Herod who was so desperate to have the baby Jesus killed that he had murdered all the baby boys under two in Bethlehem. *That* Herod was known as Herod the Great. He got the term 'Great' not from his morality but from his reputation for being a builder of great buildings. But the evil Herod

gene clearly ran in the family. It was Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded. And here in Acts 12, it is Herod the Great's grandson, Herod Agrippa II, who began persecuting Christians, partly, we read in v3, because it went down well with his Jewish subjects ... And it was a pretty vicious persecution. If Stephen was the first believer to die for his faith, James, the brother of John, the sons of Zebedee called 'Boanerges', the 'Sons of thunder', was the very first apostle to be martyred for following Christ.

They even seized Peter, the chief apostle. Having captured this big fish, Herod made sure there would be no escape for him. Just look at v4: at any given time there would amazingly be *four* guards assigned to Peter ...

What's going on here? Herod the Great wanted the Baby Jesus dead. His grandson, Herod Agrippa, wanted to wipe out those first Christians. Why? It must be more than just the murderousness of the Herod family, because people are *still* killing Christians, 2,000 years later. Why? It's to the Christians that we owe our schools, hospitals, humane treatment of our enemies, care for orphans, widows, the importance of the individual, freedom - the list is endless. Yes, I know, Christians have done some very terrible things in history, but that is when they are acting as sinners, not as true followers of the Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace. That would be like condemning all doctors because people like Dr Mengele experimented on Jews in concentration camps, or Dr Harold Shipman murdered old ladies. The influence of Christians has been beneficent. So why kill them?

Why kill *Jesus*, when all he came to earth to do was to seek and save the lost, bring healing, forgiveness and new hope to people? The answer lies in the fact that that *wasn't* all *Jesus* came to do. He *also* came to *reign*. He came as *King*. King Herod was quick to see, even in this vulnerable, weak little baby, a huge threat to his power-base. Of course, *Jesus* did not plan to grow up and push Herod off his throne, although that is how *Herod* might have seen it. But *Jesus'* rule of *love*, and *peace*, and perfect *justice*, shewed up the corrupt, vicious power-politics of earthly rulers like Herod, and ultimately subverted it. Many of our viler leaders and politicians don't like the pure light of *Jesus Christ* being shone on them. They will naturally resist *Christ*. They will resist the idea that one day they must account for themselves to him as Judge. The best way to evade that inconvenient truth is to kill *Jesus*, to ridicule him, and to silence his followers who keep reminding the world of *Jesus*.

Too many financiers and bankers thought they could get away with sharp practices. They didn't want followers of *Jesus* banging on about truth and honesty and integrity. So they dealt with these inconvenient truths by rubbishing *Jesus*, by claiming that only weak people looking for a crutch need 'religion'. They conveniently excused themselves from attending church where they would hear God's Truth by saying that all Christians are hypocrites. Those bankers thought the party would go on for ever and they could put their hands over their ears and sing 'La la la! I can't hear you!' Well, the inconvenient truth has now caught up with them (and with us).

Too many people think they can do what they like without any harmful consequences. They *certainly* don't want parsons preaching at them, warning them of the consequences. So to shut out *that* inconvenient truth, they rubbish parsons and make fun of church. Jesus? Who needs him? We don't even know that he even *existed!* It's all a fraud. Isn't that why so many people bought that ridiculous book, *The Da Vinci Code*. They *wanted, nay, needed,* to believe that tripe. If there's no Jesus, no God, and the Bible is a load of nonsense, then I can do what I like, and no-one can stop me.

But it's a delusion. We *are* accountable, and there *are* consequences to our actions. The fact is that Jesus came among us as *Lord*; he came to *reign*. He demands that we do our politics, our business affairs, our personal lives *his* way, because *his* way is actually the only way that works. And this is where it becomes dirty, because many people want to do their politics, their business, and their personal lives their *own* way. And so Herod the Great tried to murder the Baby Jesus. His grandson, Herod Agrippa, persecuted those first Christians and killed the apostle James. Many schools have banned Nativity plays. You can now get Christmas postage stamps with a Christian image on it only 'under the counter'.

Such things might seem trivial, but they are society's attempts, by a thousand slices, to get rid of Jesus and to shut up his followers who insist on reminding the world that *he* is Lord. People hate that, because, like all the Herods, they want total power, so they resist it, yet it is the only way to true life and freedom, if only they could see it.