

Advent - Teresa Morgan

Today, at the beginning of the church year, we begin a new series of gospel readings, from Luke. Of all the gospel writers, Luke is the one who most likes stories, and like any good storyteller, he begins by setting the scene.

These were bad times for the people of Israel. For 60 years, they had been under Roman rule. They had a king, but he was answerable to Rome – and he wasn't exactly their own king. Herod the Great came from Edom, south of Israel – one of the kingdoms Israel is always fighting in the Old Testament. He was only half-Jewish and he didn't care much about the Law. He was well connected – he was related to most of the kings of Syria and Asia Minor. But he was hated in Israel, and with reason. more...

Herod had seized power with Roman backing from the Hasmonean kings, descendents of the great Israelite freedom fighters, the Maccabees. He spent the early years of his reign fighting off rivals and putting down rebellions. To keep the people quiet he employed a huge army of mercenaries from Northern Europe. He forbade public gatherings; it was even illegal to stop and talk to someone in the street. He was terrified of conspiracies and executed anyone he suspected of being disloyal – including one of his wives, three brothers-in-law and three of his sons.

To impress his Roman masters, Herod built a Roman theatre and amphitheatre in Jerusalem, and held games with gladiators and wild beast fights. He built himself a magnificent and heavily fortified palace. On the edges of Israel he even built temples to the Roman Emperor. The only thing he did which might have been popular was to restore the Jerusalem Temple. But he spoiled that by setting up a huge Roman-style eagle over the main gate, which was utterly against Jewish Law. As he lay dying in 4 BC, two Rabbis roused the people to pull down the eagle, and one of Herod's last acts was to have them burned alive. From everything we know about him, the story that he had all the baby boys in Bethlehem murdered, because he'd heard that a new King of the Jews had been born there, is horribly believable.

But if Herod was bad, during Jesus's lifetime, things would get worse. When Herod died, rebellions broke out all over Israel and were brutally suppressed. Herod's kingdom was divided by the Romans between three of his sons. Two of them proved incompetent, so by the time Jesus was grown up, Israel had been partitioned. The north became a dependency under Herod Antipas – the one who executed John the Baptist. The south became a province under a governor, Pontius Pilate.

During all this time, the amazing thing was how the ordinary people of Israel managed to get on with their lives and hold their community together. Families looked after each other. Friends looked out for each other. They even looked after strangers. And so, in the gospels, when Jesus, as a wandering preacher and healer, comes to a strange town, we find that someone will give him a meal – a bed. Lend him a room – a boat – a donkey.

We hear of people sharing their bit of bread and fish with strangers at a meeting. There's the family at Cena who celebrate a wedding and invite not only Mary and her son, but all his friends too. There are the friends who get together to bring another friend to Jesus to be healed. And of course there are all the parents who beg and pester and persuade Jesus to heal their children. There's even the odd tax collector and Roman centurion with a secret sympathy for the oppressed. A lot of good people.

But it's easy to see why, in those days, so many Jews were looking for a Saviour. A Messiah who would muster a great army and throw out the Romans and become King of a free Israel... It's also easy to see why other people kept their heads down and hardly dared hope for salvation.

The very first story in Luke is a story about an ordinary couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who aren't looking for salvation. They would have liked children, but they think they're getting too old for that now. Zechariah was a priest. One day, he was burning incense in the Temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. He was terrified, but the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call him John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, because he will be great in the sight of the Lord... He will be filled with the Holy Spirit... and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." Zechariah couldn't believe it – so the angel struck him dumb, and for nine months, he couldn't say a word. But Elizabeth believed it, and what's more, when a young relative of hers called Mary turned up saying that she was also going to have an exceptional baby, Elizabeth believed that too. They were going to get, not just children, but salvation!

Perhaps God looked at Israel and decided that a Messiah who was a king – a warrior – wasn't the answer. Ever since Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, the Israelites had fought war after war. Even King David and King Solomon. And golden ages under great kings never last. The time that the prophets had foretold – when the deaf would hear and the lame would walk, when the lion would lie down with the lamb, and the earth would be filled with the knowledge of God – would never come by fighting. A new king wasn't what Israel needed.

Instead, God called on a different class of Israelites and a different kind of Messiah. He asked ordinary people to have faith, and hope. To bring children into the world, and bring them up to love God and each other. To teach them that it's not kings and emperors and power and money that matter, but love, and justice, and peace, and truth. To teach them not to kill, but to heal. To change not constitutions, but hearts and minds. God chose to work with what was best in Israel – the unsung, unspectacular, extraordinarily persistent goodness of ordinary people. He gave them, not a revolution, but a revelation. Not a new Israel, but a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Luke believed that one day, there would be a super-revolution. Not just a new king over Israel, but a Kingdom of God over all the earth. In today's gospel we heard Jesus describe how 'there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars ... People will

faint from fear of what is coming upon the world ... Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud, with power and glory' ... and heaven and earth will pass away.

Well, we're still waiting for that day. But we have our revelation – our glimpse of the Kingdom of God. In Elizabeth's baby, who grew up to be John the Baptist, and in Mary's, who grew up to be Jesus Christ. And today, as we begin our Advent journey towards Bethlehem, we remember just one thing that the adult Jesus says, later in Luke's gospel, to an ordinary mixed group of Israelites: 'Look – see – the Kingdom of God is in you. Within you, between you, among you, every one of you.

That's the heart of our revelation. And that's the heart of God's revolution. Knowing that is what turns the kingdoms of earth into the Kingdom of God: for the people of Roman Israel, and for us.

Amen

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