

Daily Meditation 01/07/2023

Evil in the Christmas Story Yesterday and Today

Good morning.

Today we are meditating on the subject of evil that we find in the Christmas story itself. And I think this is important because, of course, it is subtracting from any efforts at sentimentalizing Christmas. It's bringing in the reality of struggle, of oppression, of terror, of the relationship of state and religion in Jesus' time, but also in our own.

So I refer in the essay today, the meditation, to this important book called *The Herods: Murder, Politics, and the Art of Succession*. The subtitle itself tells you something about the shadow side of politics. And there was plenty of that going on in Jesus' time.

This book is by Bruce Chilton, who's written some wonderful books. He is a New Testament scholar, his book *Rabbi Jesus* is excellent, his book *Rabbi Paul*, his book on Mary Magdalene, and his book on the spirituality of Jesus and Christ: all of them are, to me, very solid works. And, I might say, in all humility, that he also wrote the preface to my book on *The Pope's War: How Ratzinger's Secret Crusade Has Imperiled the Church and How It can be Saved*. So I'm very honored that he wrote the preface to this book. And he takes a perspective of the prophetic call to stand up to power, including power in religion: to speak truth to power, which is part of the prophetic demand.

And I just want to share with you something he writes about in the introduction to this book, about the politics of Jesus' day, which as I said in the essay is hinted at in the story of Herod's going after the newborn children in order to kill Jesus. And remember, he got the address, if you will, for Jesus, from the Magi. So, the Magi story blends with the manger story, and blends with the story about evil. And this is the way the gospels were woven together.

But he writes:

Whether a given Herodian ruler was cruel or generous, effective or useless, gifted or limited, their subjects could not ignore them. Those who study Judaism and Christianity today, typically treat them as a matter of background, when in fact the Herodians were in the foreground of political power.

...the foreground of political power.

Various models of theocracy that have long been recognized, from the Essenes' 'War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness,' through Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God, were not abstract assertions, but living alternatives to Herodian power. The kingdom of God that Jesus preached was a living alternative to Herodian power.

This certainly concretizes the politics of Jesus' day, and how it relates to the Gospels, doesn't it?

Tracing the relationship during the Herodian project and political theologies within Judaism and Christianity is a second main purpose in this book.

The Herodians (that is, Herod and his relatives) have exerted an outsized influence compared to the territory and forces they commanded because strands of Judaism long survived them. Among these survivals, of course, Christianity also emerged and each of the key figures within that movement -- Jesus, James (the brother of Jesus), and Paul amongst them -- dealt with a different inflection of Herodian power.

So Jesus, James, and Paul, all had to deal with the Herodian politicians, if you will, in their lifetime and in their work.

For this reason Herod's successors, above all his sons Archelaus, Antipas and Philip, his grandson Agrippa the first, and his great-grandchildren Agrippa the second and Berenike, who was his wife, were all vital influences on the emergence of Christianity. The competitors and victims of the Herodian project are as fascinating as the Herodians themselves; many of them contributed to models or governance that exercise influence until this day."

And of course, one of Herod's relatives was the woman criticized when John criticized the marriage of Antipas' brother Philip. And it was John, who was Jesus' mentor, who got beheaded for that. So imagine what that meant to Jesus as a young man, an adolescent, when his mentor was beheaded.

So you can see that from the beginning, there was this interconnection between Jesus and the stories around Jesus, including the Infancy story about Herod coming after all the young people, and boys, to kill them.

So from the beginning, the shadow of the cross, if you will, and the Empire and its wrestling with the powers of religion and Judaism and the Temple and so forth. All of this is part, as Bruce Chilton says, not of the background, but as the foreground of the drama that Jesus was part of and was addressing when he talks about another kingdom, the kingdom of God, that would be so much different from this kingdom of tyranny, and even torture, which of course, ultimately, nailed Jesus to the cross.

So there's much to meditate on at this time of Christmas. And some of it is doxa and glory, but some of it is about evil, and the moxa to stand up to it, the Moxie to stand up to it, that Jesus the Prophet brought forward.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.