

## Christmas past and present. The Middle East and Western values

The Christmas season in both Eastern and Western forms of Christianity following their different ecclesiastical calendars is now over. Once again the message of peace and goodwill from the angels has rung out to a largely indifferent world.

Prominent amongst the Christmas narratives is the visit of the wise men, not least their encounter with the despotic King Herod. The Herod dynasty of client monarchs was Hasmonean in extraction and as such not fully recognised by religious Jews of the time. However Herod the Great ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC. His involvement with any visitors from the East is therefore problematic but as a tyrant vassal king he was perfectly capable of ordering a massacre of Holy Innocents or indeed many others. In his own family he killed his favourite wife and two sons.

After the death of Herod the Great three of his sons divided his territories one of whom Herod Antipas is probably the one referred to in the gospels as the executor of John the Baptist and present at the trial of Jesus. The grandson of Herod the Great Agrippa I who was a friend of the Roman Emperor Caligula and subsequently Claudius is the one who supposedly persecuted the Jerusalem Church and his son Agrippa II assisted in the trial of Paul as recorded in Acts.

The dynasty through its shrewd and close relationship with Rome managed to keep the peace until the eventual sack of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Indeed the restored Temple itself and other immense building projects corresponded with a prolonged period of uneasy peace sustained by the Herods. During this period Christianity first gained a foothold in Jerusalem and as a precursor to expansion into the Greek-speaking world. Arguably the ruling dynasty played a significant part in the emergence of the new Faith as a world-wide religion.

The phenomenon of the justifiable tyrant in the Middle East permeates the Old Testament and prevails to this day. It is a brutal but effective form of government that has worked and ironically enabled ancient Christian minorities to survive ... until now.

Western interference with this political system can be traced back at least to the First World War aggravated by the discovery of oil in vast quantities. Subsequently, the twenty first century has also produced some inept attempts to impose Western style democracy, beginning with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The subsequent narrative of unanticipated chaos, further removal of dictators such as Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Hosni Mubarek in Egypt and the outworking of the so-called Arab Spring has provided a fertile power vacuum from which has emerged militant Islam, the Taliban, Al Qaeda and the most notorious of all, Daesh known as Islamic State.

These latter, unlike the brutal but predicable world of the former dictators, have not sheltered minorities, have persecuted Christians in particular and have thrown the world order into flux. The West has failed to understand the self-inflicted phenomenon. In Syria for example, one of the most war-torn of Middle Eastern countries, the idea of supporting 'rebel' groups of often-unknown provenance by pouring in arms has been the order of the day. Later intervention on the part of Russian support for President Assad has been lambasted and probably misunderstood. The result has been a prolongation of almost

unimaginable suffering and destruction in towns such as Aleppo. At the same time Western media and press have understandably been enraged but largely silent on the on-going battles destroying the lives of innocent civilians in Mosul in Iraq and not least the hardly reported mayhem in Yemen enabled in part by the sale of British weapons to Saudi Arabia.

This is a Middle Eastern catastrophe to rival and exceed even Biblical stories both from the Old Testament and the New.

Ironically, Christians reading their scriptures are able to trace theologically God working his purpose out over the ages, perhaps because of the oft-repeated phenomenon of 'humankind's inhumanity to humankind'. This phrase first appeared in a dirge written in 1784 by the Scottish poet Robert Burns as the more prosaic 'man's inhumanity to man'. Burns was perhaps quoting the German philosopher Samuel von Pufendorf who in 1673 wrote "More inhumanity has been done by man himself than any other of nature's causes." The potential today with modern weaponry is for very much more of the same.

Which should leave Western Christians in particular thinking carefully at Christmas or indeed at any other time. The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus Christ has manifestly not yet come, especially if its characteristics are love, joy peace and so on. Of course Jesus himself is quoted in Matthew 10 says that he has 'not come to bring peace but a sword.' Preachers argue this as a metaphorical statement but Jesus still ends on the cross.

So Christmas's come and go as did the wise men who returned home by another way before the slaughter of Herod perceived child rivals. The fact that other slaughter continues to this day, not least in the name of strident religion, does more than give the God in whose name it is proclaimed a bad press, it results in real and actual suffering and death. The only lesson to draw from this is that almost perversely Western leaders should chose their client tyrants with care if they want to keep the peace. Perhaps this is ultimately an example of John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism or perhaps with a little divine help it might go further. One way or another those who are left crawling around the ruins of their homes and lives might simply be glad of any leader who can bring peace whether they adhere to Western values or not.

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