

Tyrants old and new.

The New Testament is peppered with references to the Herod dynasty. For example the recently recounted Christmas story of the visit of the Magi concludes with Herod the Great (74/73 BCE – 4BCE) ordering a massacre of the innocents (Matthew 2 v 16). Whether this is a real event or not it is certainly something that Herod was capable of, he did after all, amongst many other atrocities, murder his favourite wife Mariamne and many of her clan the Hasmoneans. A ghoulish touch was that Herod supposedly kept his wife's body; such was the love he had for her, embalmed in honey for years afterwards.

Herod's son Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded (Matthew 14) and was the one Jesus was sent to before his crucifixion (Luke 23). Later Herod the Great's grandson Herod Agrippa (Acts 12) persecuted the early Jerusalem Church and had James the Apostle put to death. On the plus side Agrippa's son Herod Agrippa II learning that Paul was a Roman citizen allowed him to defend himself and to preach (Acts 25 – 26).

The dynasty worked closely with the Roman powers of the time and by a mixture of despotism and guile kept the peace and held the Romans back from the Jewish people. Herod the Great rebuilt the second temple, considered a wonder of the world at the time, built fortresses, developed a water supply for Jerusalem and founded new cities.

The Herods were prototypical Middle-Eastern tyrants of the kind familiar to us today. Whilst they were in power and had good working relations with the Roman overlords all was well. Those who crossed the Herod's were in trouble and Luke 13 vv 31- 32 for example has Jesus in a near miss, when told that Herod wanted to kill him. Jesus reply is interesting, bravely calling Herod a "fox".

The final end of the Herods came when they fell out of favour with Rome. A Jewish nationalist uprising then led to the destruction of the Temple in CE 70 and the razing of Jerusalem from which destruction centuries were required for recovery.

Anyone seeking modern day tyrannical parallels will not have to look far. From Iraq and Saddam Hussein to Libya and Muammar Gaddafi to Syria and Bashar al- Assad, each sustained peace by despotic rule. Not very long ago the West supported each of these leaders and perversely that period now contrasts almost favourably with today's chaos. The current situation of growing anarchy, religious fundamentalism and a West perplexed and reeling in terms of how to respond is the new backdrop to a dangerous and unstable environment that has the potential to erupt into worldwide conflict.

Alas, there is no such thing as a thought-through benign tradition of democracy in the Middle East and only a few countries to date are

plausibly democratic and stable. Western illusions of a new democratic order associated with military intervention have turned sour. Cynics therefore might easily trace current troubles to the ill-advised adventure in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In fact Western culpability in the troubles of the Middle East stretches back at least to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and perhaps also to the Crusades.

Added to this potent mix is the scarcely understood historical, theological and often-violent division between Sunni and Shia Islam. Additionally as a kind of collateral damage there is the serious plight of the ancient Oriental Orthodox Churches of the Middle East. Previously tolerated their adherents are being attacked and persecuted on all sides, often because of their religious association with the same faith of what are seen as the Western aggressors. Indisputably their position, always precarious, was much safer and more stable under tyrants such as Assad of Syria who being part of a minority religious group himself - the Alawites (Shia but considered syncretistic by others in Islam) protected the Christians and other minorities. Regime change in Syria trumpeted by European and American politicians might not necessarily produce the desired well-meant end that is intended, at least for our fellow religionists. Recall that the rightly demonised Saddam Hussein of Iraq nevertheless had Christians in his government and kept Islamic radicals out of his country.

It is against this confusing backdrop that the Churches of the West have been slow to respond. Even when thousands of migrants have made their way into Europe fleeing mayhem and carnage church leaders have been largely silent. Apparently paralysed like their political leaders Western Christian silence has been deafening. At the very least there should be a call for a compassionate reaching out to all those in need, and a concomitant highlighting of the perilous existence of fellow Christians in the historic heartlands of the Faith.

Instead Western Christians, especially Anglican ones, are otherwise preoccupied. They have to our collective shame, chosen rather to expend their energies on their favourite tyrant namely human sexuality.

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