

A Matter of Faith

Christmas Eve, 2008

The December 2008 issue of National Geographic has a cover story called ‘the ‘real’ King Herod.’ It’s mostly about his numerous building projects. There is a great picture on the cover of one of the impressive projects that Herod oversaw during his volatile reign as King of Judea. So, as you might imagine, that article caught my attention, and I turned to it to read it. And you know how articles often have ‘quote boxes’ embedded in the text? There is one of those on the second page of the text of this article.

And it says this: “*Herod is best known for slaughtering every male infant in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus. He is almost certainly innocent of this crime.*” I thought, “Wow – now that’s some new information! I wonder what makes them say that?” So I read further, and discovered that the *sole* reason for this reputable magazine making a provocative blanket statement like that is that “there is no report apart from Matthew’s account.” So, because this is found only in the Gospel – it then, apparently, ‘almost certainly’ did not happen.

Now historians who study ancient cultures, in fact, frequently accept the testimony of a single source if it is credible. They do so even when the source – like Josephus for example – has proven not entirely credible. Yet Josephus is trusted to some degree, in spite of his writing many years after the events he records, and his obvious bias in writing. But the Bible is not afforded that ‘grace’.

I remember talking about this in a seminary class, where a professor suggested a couple of reasons why there is no extra Biblical attestation of this event.

One reason was that ancient kings never recorded their failures. Only their victories. And this panicked attempt to eliminate a threat would not have appeared too flattering for Herod, although the action certainly fits his profile – as recorded by Matthew and other sources. I mean, the guy had his wife murdered, three of his own sons, his mother-in-law, and numerous other members of his court. This is the kind of thing he would have done. But he wouldn’t have remembered – recorded it- if it failed.

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Another reason for this not making a big splash in history is that we tend to think of ancient Bethlehem in terms of our Christmas cards and modern urban images. When in fact, Bethlehem in the day of Christ's birth was a very small village – probably about 6 acres total. So we're talking about a town around the size of this church's property. And frankly, just like today, in those days events that only affected a few, didn't get a lot of publicity.

I was a little disappointed that a magazine with this status would be so blatantly biased against the historical witness of the Bible. Matthew, in fact (and all the gospels) have proven *very* reliable on those occasions when there is opportunity to compare them with other current writings (of which, frankly, there are precious few as old as our New Testament documents). I was disappointed, but I wasn't surprised. Because I understand - they have made a decision on a certain issue, one that anyone who is considering the claims of Christ and the Christian faith has to eventually deal with, one way or another.

I can put this issue in terms of a simple question: “Do I *want* to believe, or not?” The answer to that question is going to color a lot of your internal input when it comes to faith related issues. You are going to see things or *not* see them depending on where you come down on that question.

Because, you see, if someone doesn't *want* to believe, there will rarely be enough evidence to convince them that this is all true, and real, and that it is worth staking your life on. Now, understand, I'm not saying that there is no evidence supporting the Scriptures, or that Christianity is illogical, or that the church is not a place for intelligent people, or that the Church is a place for people who don't want to think. I don't believe any of that at all.

I'm convinced that you can make a very strong 'case for faith'. I think that Christianity is amazingly logical - i.e., it makes tremendous sense. The way that the story of Jesus emerges from the calling of Abraham, to the giving of the Law, with the entire system of sacrifices and high priests (we talked about this last Sunday) – how it all culminates in Jesus. It's a cohesive story that was written over a thousand years by many different writers, and it makes so much sense, it holds together, it explains so much about who we are and why we're like we are... it's a

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story of hope and redemption and a sovereign loving God moving throughout history. There is nothing else in the history of thought that is even remotely similar.

But if a person does not *want* to believe, there won't be enough evidence in all the books from all the scholars in the world to change their mind. And so, the title of this message: it is, truly A Matter of Faith.

Why would someone not want to believe? I've had people ask me that question over my years in ministry – usually coming from the same perspective. As one who has found in Christ the only hope they've ever known... as people who have seen their lives, which were once empty and hollow, filled with meaning and purpose. As people who have discovered the indescribable joy of knowing that they are loved, with an unending, eternal Divine love and their sins have been forgiven and removed forever – as people are living in the joy of Christ, having a family of faith all over the world, experiencing that promised 'peace that passes all understanding', they ask this almost as a rhetorical question: "Why would anyone *not* want to believe?"

Why would anyone turn this away, or, turn away *from* all this?

I have a theory about that. It's almost certainly not the *only* reason for this, but I've seen it borne out in many a circumstance over the years. I think a lot of people inherently realize that *if Christianity is true, it is going to cost me something*. And I'm not talking about money – or possessions, or the like. I'm talking about something deeper than that. More fundamental.

If God is real, (which most people are willing to grant) and if God has actually communicated with us in Christ Jesus (which is where that general belief gets in our face – or as they used to say about preachers, 'that's where they quit preachin' and commenced to meddlen'!'); *if* God has indeed spoken to us in Christ Jesus then we need to pay attention to what he had to say. If God was in Christ then we find ourselves accountable to something other than our own ideas of how things should work, and how we should live.

That is a foundational, paradigm altering shift – to even decide to be *open* to the possibility that this just *may* be true can change the direction of a life. So many, like the authors of that

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magazine article, simply choose to reject it out of hand at every opportunity. If the Bible says it, “It must almost certainly not be true.” And I then, don’t have to pay attention...

I came across an interesting quote this week:

Christmas demands faith, because Christmas is a mystery. Our reason cannot succeed in trying to understand how God could possibly have loved us to such a degree. The shepherds are given a sign. They will find him in a manger. There the infant Jesus has been placed ... a sign of extreme poverty and of God's supreme humility. Such a thing baffles the intellect. It teaches us that to welcome the message of Christ, the divine Redeemer, reason must be laid aside. Only humility, which melts into trust and adoration, can comprehend and welcome God's saving humility.¹

That was written by Pope John Paul II.

It takes humility to understand God’s humility. We have to be willing to lay aside our own agendas, our experience-based systems of morality, our self-centered ideas of justice, and take in this mind altering new Way. A way of peace and servanthood; a Way of Sacrifice and self-giving. It just goes against our ‘grain’ as human beings in an ‘every man for himself’ world.

And how gently God the Father brings this message to us – and as Pope John Paul II was getting at, this humility doesn’t ‘register’ to many of us. It’s foreign. God’s greatest message does not come in power, or in brute force, or in unbreakable syllogisms, or well-constructed arguments. It comes through a bunch of voices calling faintly in the wilderness to ‘get ready’. God is planning something wonderful! It comes with the long journey and travails of an ancient nation. It comes through the quiet cry, of all things, of an infant, born to an unwed teenaged mother. But in Christ, God has spoken to us all.

In his excellent book, “The Jesus I Never Knew,” author Philip Yancey contrasts the humility that characterized Jesus’ royal visit to planet earth with the prestigious image associated with world rulers today:

In London, looking toward the auditorium’s royal box where the queen and her family sat, I caught glimpses of the...way rulers stride through the world: with bodyguards, and a trumpet fanfare and a flourish of bright clothes and flashing jewelry.

Queen Elizabeth II had recently visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, forty pints of plasma, and white kid-

¹ Pope John Paul II in *Draw Near to God*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 38, no. 14

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leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars.

In meek contrast, God's visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him.²

So we sing...

*How quietly, how quietly, the wondrous gift is given
as God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin
where meek souls will receive him,
still, the dear Christ enters in.*

Truly, the Christ will enter any heart where a humble invitation is found. The Bible says that 'All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.' But it is also very much aware that not all *will* call upon the name of the Lord. There will be some who trip over the humility. There will be some who don't *want* to face the inevitable consequences of faith, not understanding that these 'consequences' are wonderful, and more precious than silver or gold.

Friends, I don't know your heart tonight. But I do know that whether or not you have articulated this question in these exact words, you have come, nevertheless, to some conclusion in it: "Do you *want* to believe?" Perhaps, because of a poor witness of someone in your past, or because of a misuse of Scripture that made you a victim, or because you just don't think it's worth it – whatever the reason, if you have so far answered that question 'NO'; perhaps this is the night to change your mind.

Look at this child in the manger... read the Gospels – maybe for the first time with a heart that asks, 'Could this be true?' Consider the claim of faith that "In Jesus we see the face of God." And find with countless others, that in gazing on that Face, we can never be the same.

² Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995)