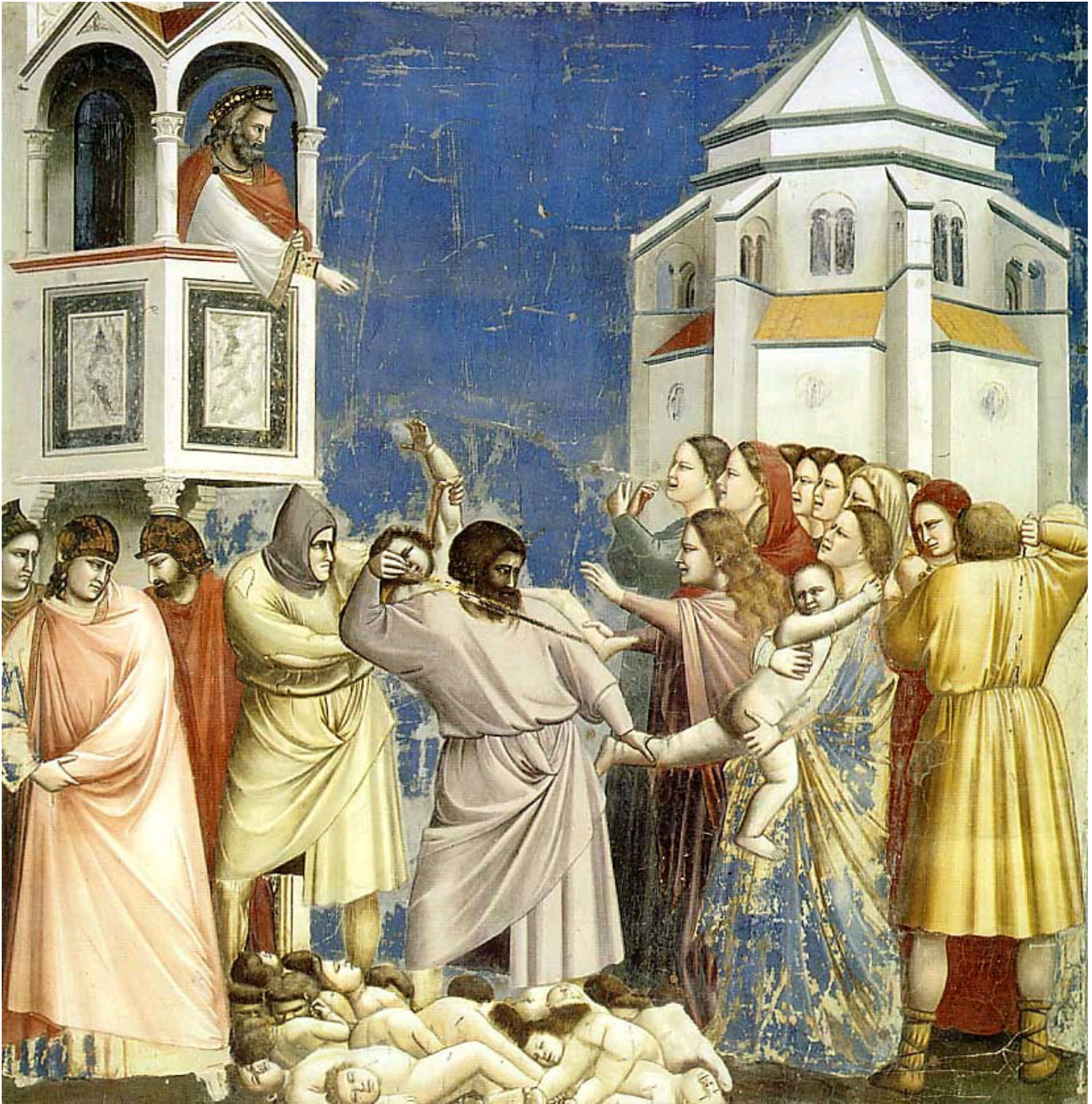


The Childermas Letters



2010

Childermas 2010

As I reflected on this theme during the Advent season, I wondered about the timing of Childermas - on December 28th. If Jesus was born in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, and the Magi arrived there at Epiphany (usually celebrated in January), how is it that Childermas falls in between? Because surely Herod did not slaughter the Innocents until after the Wise Men slipped away undetected, without reporting back to him as he had mandated them to?

A tighter time-line would be that the Magi contacted Herod before the birth of the Christ child, arriving perhaps on Christmas day, to be warned in a dream on Boxing Day, and departing in haste. That leaves enough time for Herod to perceive their secret departure, after which he went ballistic and transgressed the inalienable rights of children (the right to Protection by the adults of their species). In this sequence, remembering Childermas on December 28th every year would align the dates better with the story. The dates don't really matter, but the sequencing does.

The term Epiphany, after all, actually refers to the spread of Christianity to all lands, to all peoples, for all ages. For this reason, in Christian art, one of the Magi is usually depicted as a youth and another as dark-skinned. The fact that they were seeking the new-born "King of the Jews" is seen as a portent that the child would start a new "borderless" Kingdom. But first and foremost he came as messiah to the Jews, and the Epiphany came later. That could explain why it is celebrated later, being thematically different.

Herod was more worried about protecting himself, from the threat of a new-born King. After he dies, Joseph and Mary returned from Egypt where they had fled to escape the massacre of the Innocents. Ironically a later King Herod finally did get Jesus in his sights, so to speak - but that is another story, the Passion.

The respect with which Herod treated these Wise Men suggests that they had some kind of diplomatic status. Psalm 72: 10, 11 reads: "The kings of Tarsish and of the isles shall bring him presents... all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him."

The theme of these Childermas Letters since 2006 has been that Herod's panic was caused not just by the birth of a new leader – *but of a new way of leading*. What kind of King is placed in a manger instead of a gilded crib?!

Good Leaders meet a Bad Leader

The Magi came from afar, from "the East". More on that in a later section. Like the star itself - that they followed - they rose in the East. So presumably the star set in the west, traveling across the night sky. T. S. Eliot wrote a poem called *The Journey of the Magi*. In it, he conjurs them traveling at night... I guess you pretty well have to if you are following a star! He mentions that this meant they could keep the purpose of their convoy secret – a foreshadowing of the high stakes game they were playing - when new leaders rise up that threaten old ones... or when expatriate leaders rise up that threaten local ones.

They were wealthy, starting with their ability to meet the costs of international travel. Caravans don't come cheap! Then they brought gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Expensive gifts. For a child.

What a contrast to Herod, who spares no expense to protect himself, even trying to snafoo intelligence for his own scheming from the Magi themselves – he asks them to report back after they find him! He mobilizes researchers and ultimately the military – to locate and kill a child, in the end, many children. The slaughter of the Innocents.

The Gold Standard

Gold has long been regarded as a way to measure and store wealth. It says a lot about the values that Jesus came to espouse that gold will be used in his Kingdom to pave streets. That does not mean that his Kingdom will be materially rich – it rather means that Fort Knox will become redundant. No more hoarding and stockpiling wealth.

Gold has been the base of South Africa's economy for over a century. The historical Gold Rush ended, but left its imprint on our souls. People are still rushing for gold – for wealth.

Sadly, part of “liberation” is that non-whites want to become even richer than whites. Heaven's value-system is better – degrade gold. Don't eliminate it, just use it for pavement. Let's all walk on it! That's better than walking in mud, and we avoid falling into the same trap of materialism.

Giving Away Gold

Bill Gates and Warren Buffet are among the Wise Men of our day. They have prospered, and then come to realize the need to get out there and give some of it away. Psychologists now say that Abraham Maslow overlooked something - that there is a sixth tier to his famous *hierarchy of needs*. The top layer of self-actualization has been superseded by “giving back”. Generosity. Not stockpiling – recycling.

Francis of Assisi was even more generous than Gates and Buffet – he was going to give it all away! Until his father found out... What gave St Francis the right to give away his father's wealth - that he had not generated himself? It had not been benevolently placed in his trust to dispense to the poor. I can comprehend his father's indignation, maybe he felt that his son was lazy, an under-producer and overly-generous. It is possible that many business people look on charities that way. Nonprofits tend to be seen as amateurish in a world that is fast professionalizing. Maybe they forget the hard work and the thanklessness of working in the human services? But I do like the 50/50 formula that Gates and Buffet have come up with better than the radical “all or nothing” of St Francis. That makes gold seem worthless, but pavement does serve a useful social purpose after all!

Even the two youngest billionaires, the co-founders of Facebook, have pledged to give away half their fortunes. In fact, a total of 57 billionaires have now joined *The Giving Pledge* launched by Gates and Buffet only a few months ago. Surely their patron saint is the first wise man of the three, who gave gold? In fact, I dare say that making a public moral commitment pledging half of your fortune to the unfortunate qualifies you to join the ranks of

Wise Men everywhere. To my way of thinking, these billionaires are right up there with Caspar, the first of the Magi.

Giving and Keeping

When talking about tithing, Ron Sider once made the comment that the issue was not how much you give, but how much you keep. That shook my foundations, and pushed me personally in the direction of St Francis. I stopped focusing on my “net worth” and financial security and decided to put the well-being of others ahead of my own. There are days that I regret having done that, but on the whole I feel that it authenticates what I do (comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable).

There is a simple genius in *The Giving Pledge* – loving your neighbour *as yourself*. The prophet Ezekiel said that the sin of Sodom was not sodomy, but that its inhabitants put their own pleasure in front of the pleasure of their visitors. That was inhospitable. As humans, we have to put the protection of visitors, travelers, foreigners, refugees, and other vulnerable groups – starting with women and children - at least on a par with our own security.

Frankincense and Myrrh

“Dr. Jiao Shude, one of the most famous Chinese herb doctors of the 20th century, described the similarities and differences between the herbs and the value of combining the two...

Frankincense and myrrh both quicken the blood and relieve pain. However, frankincense moves qi to quicken the blood and also stretches the sinews, frees the channels, soothes the network vessels, and relieves pain. Myrrh, by contrast, dissipates stasis to quicken the blood and also disperses swelling and settles pain. The former tends to act on qi, while the latter acts on blood. When the two medicinals are used together, the benefits of each are mutually enhanced. Therefore, these two medicinals are almost always used together in clinical practice.”

While Chinese medicine continues to use these gum resins until today, they did not originate in Asia:

“Both myrrh and frankincense grow as small trees or shrubs; they are of the botanical family Burseraceae. Their natural growing range is limited, but this has been extended by cultivation, and the current supplies are adequate to meet worldwide demand. Today, most of the internationally-traded myrrh and frankincense are produced in the southern Arabian peninsula (Oman, Yemen) and in northeast Africa (Somalia). The primary species relied upon today are *Commiphora myrrha* for myrrh and *Boswellia caraterii* for frankincense.”

A clue to where the Magi originated may lie in the natural habitat of the two trees from which these two pitches are collected:

“The origins of myrrh and frankincense are traced to the Arabian Peninsula. According to Herodotus (5th century BC): ‘Arabia is the only country which produces frankincense, myrrh, cassia and cinnamon...the trees bearing the frankincense are

guarded by winged serpents of small size and various colors.’ Diodorus Siculus writes, in the second half of the first century BC, that ‘all of Arabia exudes a most delicate fragrance; even the seamen passing by Arabia can smell the strong fragrance that gives health and vigor.’ He also mentioned gold mines so pure that no smelting was necessary. The Magi, carrying myrrh, frankincense, and gold, came from the East: Arabia. The frankincense trade route, with transport by donkeys and later by camel caravans, reached Jerusalem and Egypt from the Dhofar region of what is today Oman, through Yemen, turning north to follow the Red Sea coast. It is likely that the same or similar species of the resin-bearing plants grew across the Red Sea in the area that is now Somalia and Ethiopia, while the collection of the gum resins was initiated in Arabia.”

From their origin on the shores of the Gulf of Aden (that link the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea), they spread out, like the better known *Aloe Vera* which also has Arabian origins:

“In these ancient times, myrrh had been used in Egypt for embalming the bodies of Pharaohs, and frankincense had been used in India to make incense for worship (in India, a related species of plant is indigenous, though it produces an inferior product). Myrrh and frankincense, traded throughout the Middle East at least since 1500 B.C., eventually came to China.”

It is still customary for people to deliver gifts to celebrate the birth of a baby. How would parents react today if you brought along a life-time supply of pain killers? Or some embalming oil? It’s like bringing a coffin instead of a crib! “Congratulations on the birth of your child, Mary and Joseph – here are some strong analgesics to help him through the pain that is in store for him, and some embalming fluid as *the good, they die young!*”

Sometimes a distinction is made between the two gum resins in terms of significance at the Adoration of the Magi.

“Their gifts to the Christ Child have a symbolic meaning: gold to a King, frankincense to One Divine, myrrh, the emblem of death, to a Sufferer. To the Christian, these gifts represent the offering to Christ of wealth and energy, adoration, and self-sacrifice.”

Are leaders born or made?

The gifts of Melchior and Balthasar raise a leadership question that relates to children and youth. Can leadership skills be acquired? Or do they belong to a select few who have what it takes? Royal families come to mind – and these are still quite common in African culture. There are a few Dlamini’s at C4L, for example – and local people almost expect them to lead!

The point is that portents at birth like a star in the sky giving the signal to both friendly and hostile leaders that a new leader has emerged, suggest a biblical endorsement of the belief that some people are “born leaders”. If so, why did Jesus invest so much time in discipling others to become the future leaders of his movement? One of these was probably African and from a royal family – Bar Ptolemy (in English, Bartholemew). But the others were from other careers, dominated by fishermen, but not only. (Matthew, for example, was a tax collector).

The frankincense for worship may be less about Jesus being “born to rule” and more about his immaculate conception? In other words, as *God with us*, to be worshipped and adored.

A fragrance for worship, pleasing to God, and a spice for embalming the body certainly send mixed signals. If “he shall be called Wonderful” then why myrrh at his birth?! The Christmas story is indeed a mix of sweet and bitter and that is why I agree with Doug Koop that *we should keep the Herod in Christmas!* Choirs of angels were one part of it. The slaughter of the Innocents was another. Sometimes this is called “the shadow of the Cross”. Every so often you get this sense of foreboding. Surely Benazir Bhutto had done a risk assessment before she returned to Pakistan? She knew what could happen.

Being a leader takes guts. It can be dangerous and lonely.

Being a leader can be a pain! It is not all glitz and glitter.

You will need myrrh.

Leadership can be expensive. Ask John McCain. Sarah Palin has taken note and is busy earning her millions!

You will need gold.

Being a leader will make you aware of your own short-comings, and your need for God’s wisdom and counsel. Consult with him.

As a leader, you could be the next human sacrifice. Right here in Mbombela, in recent years, leaders like Jimmy Mohlala have been eliminated for standing up against corruption.

You will need frankincense.

The Divine Sacrifice

I recently wrote a poem called about Abraham, a great leader, who is regarded by Jews, Christians and Muslims with reverence. It is about one leader and one child, his only son.

He was a pioneer, a trail-blazer, and a role model. He was also very human and thus imperfect. He liked succession plans, and learned that acting from self-preservation did not please God. He was wealthy, but refused to collect the spoils after winning a battle – acknowledging that victory belonged to the Lord. So he was a worshipper, and often sacrificed animals on altars. In spite of his class-act hospitality and faith, the “shadow of the cross” can even be foreseen in the events of his life... the need for myrrh.

At Childermas, we cannot forget that leadership is a mixed bag. There are good ones like the Magi and Abraham, and there are bad ones like Herod. Even good people do bad things. And bad things happen to good people. But rarely do bad leaders get it right.

THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT!

Strike one!

Famine is no excuse
For bending the rules
Your wife is not your sister
You did not protect her
You put her in harm's way

No matter how intimidating the African despot
No matter how surpassing is your lady's loveliness
No matter the congruence with local customs
You swung the bat
And clear missed the ball
Cheaters never prosper

Strike two!

You listened to Sarah
Like Adam listened to Eve
Hagar is young
Hagar is an exotic foreigner
Hagar is attractive and accessible
A maid obeys orders
She complies to bear your love-child

But it backfired on Sarah
Enraged by Hagar's attitude
She expelled the mother of Ismael
Started a blood feud
That has lasted for millennia
Not for mere centuries
The father of faith
became the father of feud
The father of a multitude
Started the mother of all battles
Israelites versus Canaanites
Israelis versus Palestinians
Ad infinitum

Two down, one to go
You set off for Mount Moriah
With firewood and matches
And a secret, shocking intent.

Abraham, this was no camping week-end!
No father-son bonding exercise!
You were going to incinerate him!

What about the conventions
on the rights of the child?

Did sacrificing your only begotten son
not transgress his inalienable rights?
Political correctness aside, Abraham,
could you really?
Kill your own son?
Could you?!

Get serious, father Abraham
Was he a teenager, or what?!
You lied to a head of state
You preempted the promised multitude
With a perpetual blood feud
Foul ball!
Hit hard, but out of bounds

At the summit
You found a ram in a thicket
That's amazing
But does not absolve you of intent
You are a sick man, Abraham
Dreaming of infanticide
Romulus and Remus were tossed into the Tiber
But Moses was kept in hiding
By parents who were not law-abiding citizens
Whereas you had no superior
To proclaim an edict
There is no reasonable doubt
You say God told you to?
Tell that to the international tribunal

You were being tested?
By human standards, you struck out
But in God's game plan
On that same mountain range
Two thousand years later
Two thousand years ago
Another Father
Let his only Son be crucified
Same time, same station
Until he cried out to his Father
Why have you forsaken me?
No surrogate this time
The same intentional scenario
Another Father
Ready to sacrifice his Son
Another test

Another pitch
Nice hit, Abraham!
HOME RUN!!!