

What Next?

A reflection upon Matthew 2:12-19 and John 1:1-18

One Christmas Eve, a storm blew up in our city so fiercely that the power went out for two whole hours. No Christmas tree lights, no boiling kettle or pots for traditional hot meals and drinks. No music to set the mood. Can we even begin to imagine how much each of our lives would change without the simple presence of electricity for lights, heat, appliances and entertainment? It would truly be a “world-changing” event.



It reminds us, post-Christmas Day that what has just past was a commemoration of a world-changing event. That sounds a bit dramatic - “world changing” conjures images of a Tsunami or an asteroid hit or a nuclear war. Everyone in the world would changed and affected.

But really, I’m referring to our “personal worlds;” the worlds that we each live in that are unique to us; where each one of us sets the standards for what is significant, what is important and what matters. A family can all live in the same house, but each person lives in their own personal world. With modern technology, we have immense control over what we hear, what we have to think about, what confronts us in any day.

In other words, our personal worlds are made up of what we want. We are kings. We’re in charge. In a very real sense, we get to draw a circle and say “in this circle, I am lord.” In that personal world, few changes come unless we want them to come.

The post-Christmas bible readings for many churches include the account of a ruler during the time Jesus was born, Herod the Great. Herod’s personal world was changed - rocked to its foundations, by three visitors from the east, knocking at his door and asking “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?”

Herod is one of the most interesting characters in the Bible, because we know a great deal about him from history and archeology. If you’ve ever heard this part of the Christmas story and thought that slaughtering children sounded like a bit of a dramatic over-reaction, let me assure you it’s right on the money for Herod.

When the Romans occupied Judah and what was once Israel, they didn’t want a local king to be in power because of the risk of revolution, so they franchised out the job of King of the Jews to the Herod family. Herod wasn’t Jewish and he wasn’t royalty. He was an Edumean and his father was wealthy. Herod probably spent every day he was king deeply aware that he didn’t deserve to be there, that his people hated him no matter how many great temples he built and anyone who could claim to be a descendant of David could easily become a Messiah and a revolutionary to overthrow him. This might shed some light on Herod’s “personal world” and how the news of a royal birth sounded to him.

It also helps to remember that Herod could get crazy, to the point of violence. He eventually killed several members of his family for perceived conspiracies against him. Sending out his soldiers to clean up a potential problem among the children born in David's royal birthplace is exactly what we would expect from Herod.

So this part of the Bible has always reminded us that some in the world hate the idea of Jesus Christ as king, and some of those people can become very nasty, even violent about it. For all of Christian history there have been Herods, who greet the news of Jesus birth with opposition and hostility.

But what about most people? What about your workmate, neighbor or family member? How is their world affected by the birth of Jesus Christ? To most people you and I know, the people who surround and touch your personal world, the arrival of a new King, Jesus Christ, means almost nothing. Their worlds- public and personal- are not altered or changed at all. The birth of Jesus is, for them, as dry and dusty a piece of information as the most boring trivia in the most boring history textbook. They are not like Herod. They are like the vast majority of people in the world the night Jesus was born whose lives were completely unaffected. The announcement that God is now with us; that the wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father and Prince of Peace is ruling and reigning in the world seems to have little impact. The Son of God has been given for us, and our lives could be more affected by the price of petrol than by the birth of the Messiah.

In England today, 70% or so of those born there are still baptized in the Church of England. Yet 861,000 only 852,000 turn up for Anglican services. The population of Britain is about 60.7 million people, so even that's way less than 2% of people going to English Churches regularly. Australia may fare worse for Anglican attendance versus general population.

Even when society's values are still firmly aligned with many Christian values, it is right to call these post-Christian times, and we can't celebrate Christmas without asking how we Christians should live in them.

The post-Christmas lectionary readings in church are among the most important verses in the Bible for they direct us to "what next?" What now in a world that doesn't care. The Gospel of John tells us that "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness doesn't comprehend it. He (Christ) was in the world, and the world did not know him. He came unto his own, and his own didn't receive him." Sound familiar?

The coming of Jesus Christ into the world didn't impress many at the time. In fact, the entire life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus wouldn't have been on anyone's daily news summary for more than a few moments during the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple. John wrote about what it was like to believe something that most didn't believe, they didn't even know it happened. The whole world had changed in Jesus, but most people's world never changed at all.

So John the apostle points us to John the Baptist. "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light." To "bear witness" means to demonstrate that your personal world has been changed and transformed by Jesus Christ. Luke said that the angels told the shepherds that there was a Savior, a Messiah and Lord...in Bethlehem, not in Rome or Jerusalem. And the shepherds' world was changed. They become witnesses: "And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child....glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

To be a witness in post-Christian times is to leave an unmistakable trail of evidence that your world- and **the** world- has been changed by the coming of Jesus Christ. It doesn't mean reducing Christianity to a t-shirt or a bumper sticker. You, your life, your calling and all you have, becomes a witness to world-changing one.

John was not the light. That's important and fundamental. The message is not about us, our church, how great it is to be a Christians (it's actually quite tough). It's important to remember that what Christians are pointing to with their changed lives is the Lord Jesus, not the changes he makes. There are many ways to explain what changes a person's life, but the change that faith in Jesus makes reorients life so that we are never caught claiming that we're wonderful, because that doesn't hold water and it's just not true.

John tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel (v 14), "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." In these post-Christian times, it is tempting to look the other way, change the channel, put your headphones on, or just keep a low profile. Instead, let's put flesh, hands, feet, gifts, creativity and life into the service of God.

The early Christians lived in their own version of post-Christian times...pre-Christian times. Those days were dominated by Greek and Roman values and ethics. Few knew and few cared about Jesus' values and teaching. It was when Christians entered that world by serving the excluded, serving the hurting, inviting the forgotten, risking, creating, suffering, giving and going that Christianity looked "world-changing" to the world. Putting flesh, hands and feet on the message of Christmas makes a difference.

In a world that may prefer to take the way of Herod or of those who slept through it all, we are invited to be people who live in a changed world, as changed people. When you have found the treasure that we have found in Jesus, everything will change. What will change with you in this New Year?