

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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When Power Comes to Pay Homage

Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2.1-12

Russ Dean, January 3, 2010



Christmas Day surely is, “slow as Christmas”! Yet, once it has come, the opposite is just as true. Just as slowly as it comes, it’s gone in the blink of an eye. After a 6-week buildup, Christmas flies by, and way before I’m ready for it, a New Year has arrived, and we’re looking down the barrel of routine... mundane... ordinary... Life. As wonderful as it may seem to live in the high of Christmas all the year... it is not to be. Oh, a few folks will drag their feet and leave their lights up till Valentine’s Day, but those lights will fool no one. Now, in some ways, after the frenzy of December I’m quite ready – but I can also tell you that today comes with a very certain let down. The wreaths are gone. The tree has disappeared. There are no more candles. No more carols. And “*Feah naht*” has been stored away until next year.¹ It’s over.

Just as quickly, Matthew lets us down, too. In fact, even while he’s telling his story, he is preparing us for the aftermath – even more ominous than mundane. While presenting the “sweet little holy child” for our emotional enrichment, Matthew foreshadows the story that is to come. And it’s hardly a “holy jolly Christmas.” For as the magi worship below that magnificent star, the sinister smile of Herod (who was great, but not good) darkens the horizon. While gifts are being laid before the child, Herod is planning his own worship service for the God who lives, sometimes too much among us.

¹ In our annual living nativity, called, “The Judean Hills: A Living Tableau,” the recorded voice of the angel speaks in a deeply southern accent, “*Feah naht...*”

Though King Herod never quite makes it to the Bethlehem of Matthew's narrative, to offer his gift, the history of the world makes it all too clear that he did get there. For he, and all the Powers That Be, have been paying homage, ever since.²

On November 16 of this past year, President Obama was at the beginning of a two-week tour of Asia. In the presence of Japan's Emperor Akihito and his wife, the man elected to the highest post in the land bowed at the waist in what was either a simple cultural protocol of greeting to show respect, or a blatant indication that the world's most powerful man is on an explicit mission to divest the United States of its advantage among the nations. Reporting for AFP news service, Stephanie Griffith said:

The gesture appears to have touched a particularly raw nerve among Obama critics who said the president has hastened America's decline as a world superpower by being too apologetic and too deferential in his dealings with other world leaders.³

In other words, as the world's power brokers have always made crystal clear, spoken in a too-southern vernacular: "We don't bow, to nobody."⁴ And if the star-struck travelers of Matthew's tale really were wise, you would think they would have understood this. The sovereign of the land, a man with literally unlimited power wants to know where we find the child, so he, too, can *go and pay him homage*...? Yeah. Right! But if they were keen to Herod's

² As is often the case, and should be clearly obvious at this point, this sermon features the extended use of a metaphor. Herod's request to "pay homage," functions for the rest of the sermon as a symbol for the abuse of God, by humans, and human groups/organizations both political and religious. The first meditation in the bulletin was a quotation from the syndicated columnist, Leonard Pitts, related to this: "Small wonder God becomes just another product by which to turn a profit, another vehicle by which to push a dubious claim. We are beyond shame and don't even know it. Coarsened by our own boldness... God has been used with unprecedented boldness by forces both secular and sanctified. He has been made to campaign for politicians, wielded like a bludgeon by social crusaders, sold at a profit by hucksters operating from the pulpits of TV churches. For some, the idea seems to be to get what they can out of Him while the getting is good."

³ I located this quotation on the world wide web... somewhere!

⁴ I questioned the use of this illustration for fear that any political reference may detract from the message (and I have had one quite Republican inquiry!) – but the event just seemed too relevant to pass up. The King wants to pay homage... The U.S. President bows... enough said. No political commentary (related to President Obama) is intended by the illustration.

threatening ulterior motive, Matthew does not indicate it. Only when they have left their gifts do they wise up and go home by another way, leaving Herod to fend for himself.

In the year 312 CE as he prepared for battle, the Emperor Constantine I looked up to the sky and saw a cross of light above the sun, a vision which he interpreted as a divine sign. Though Constantine's mother, Helena, was a practicing Christian, until this vision at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was a skeptic. Bolstered now by his own Damascus Road conversion, however, he ordered his troops to emblazon their shields with the Greek letters chi rho, the first two letters of the name, *Christos* – and with Christ marching into battle with them, Constantine and his troops were victorious. On that victory, Christendom was born. Whether this conversion was actually a victory for Christianity, however, has been a matter of vigorous debate ever since.⁵

There is little doubt that Constantine's conversion enabled Christianity grow, from a persecuted sect into the world-wide phenomenon it is today. Many still hail Constantine as a Christian leader par excellence. For the Eastern Church, he is Saint Constantine. Under his leadership the great Church Councils codified the tenets of orthodox belief, and, aided by the protection of Constantine's sword, Jesus' own words to his disciples have been fulfilled: *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1.8)

Yes, we have taken Jesus to the ends of the earth – but at what cost? And if we have used the sword to get there, can the Christianity of Jesus really claim this success as victory?

I believe the impact of Christianity on the history of this world has been for good.

Virtually all of the art and architecture and music on which our culture is based, was born in

⁵ Though I know there is skepticism as to the accuracy of Wikipedia.com, I continue to find it a wonderful and easily accessible source to remind me facts and figures – rather than searching old seminary books for that information. Yes, I was reminded of the details of Constantine's conversion thanks to Wikipedia!

institutions supported by the Church. Higher education as practiced in the West is a product of a Christian belief in *[loving] God with all our minds* (Mark 12.30). Even the scientific method, and its findings, which now constantly challenge the Church and its basic tenets, was born out of a largely Christian undertaking. Hospitals and other institutions of care around the world bear the names of Christian saints and Christian philanthropists. Christian missions and Christian missionaries have reached into the most remote regions of this globe, taking a cup of water in the name of Christ (see Mark 9.41), taking agricultural knowledge in the name of Christ, taking medical care in the name of Christ. And, more important than all the institutional evidence that may be cited, countless millions around the world have been lifted from despair to hope. In the message of one who came to be among us, they have known the faith of hope... the hope of love... the love of God.⁶ Yes, I believe the impact of Christian faith on our world has left an indelible mark for the better... But we must be aware that there is another side.

It is a side of Christianity that some cannot see – but, in the name of Christ armies have marched on every continent, all too happy to name their brothers and sisters as enemies, and to kill them indiscriminately, instead of loving them as Jesus commanded (see Matthew 5.44). In the name of Christ a mandate was invented giving Western powers the right to colonize hundreds of nations, wiping out traditions and languages and cultures in the process. In the name of Christ, missionaries have marched into places of so-called darkness, intent on offering the light of Christ, only to offer a gospel which too often just sought to turn its converts into good Westerners or good Americans or good Southern Baptists. In the name of Christ political, military, and economic machines of every name have been defended – regardless their effect on people. Hatreds have been justified. Prejudices ordained – because Power Has Come to Pay **Homage**.

⁶ *Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love* (1 Corinthians 13.13).

We could talk about the hypocrisy of Herod. We could debate the motives of Constantine. We could condemn the colonial mentality of 18th and 19th century Europe. But we need look no further than our own nation – and into our own hearts – to find examples of the corrupting influence of power on the simple gospel of Jesus. In a sermon on the continuing influence of Constantine on our understanding of church and state, Steve Shoemaker says:

The dilemma of the church is that in its rightful effort to aid in the transformation of society, it has sometimes given up its primary calling to witness to the particularity of the message and way of Jesus, whom it calls ‘Lord.’... The church has been successful, and safe, and silent.⁷

What does it mean to follow Jesus? Is it to pay homage so we can claim to be right – or simply to be in relationship? Is it to pay homage so we can Lord our power over another⁸ – or to give oneself in service to the other? Is it to pay homage and claim superiority of knowledge or affluence or power – or to bow in the humility of human love?

The issues of church and state are among the most difficult for people to understand, I think. I’m constantly bombarded with email messages seeking to incite anger at some further infringement on my American Christian rights, by someone or some group who is, I’m told, trying to take God out of the government or the school or the public square. But what God, exactly, has been removed? Whose God is no longer in the government? How is God no longer in the schools? How could God possibly be excised from the public square – if the people of that square believe or trust or hope – in any way?

⁷ H. Stephen Shoemaker’s book, *Being Christian in an Almost chosen Nation: Thinking About Faith and Politics*,” is a book of sermons on specifically political topics. This quotation comes from the sermon, “The Promise of Post-Constantinian Christianity,” pp.37-38.

⁸ The mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus, asking that he allow her sons to sit at his right and left hand in the kingdom of God. Jesus responded with a lesson on what it meant to truly follow him, ending with these words: “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave*” (Matthew 20.25-27).

It's never God who has been removed. For it would be impossible to do so. It is only someone's understanding of God, a god of our own making, a god of our own controlling and defining, who can be removed from any aspect of our life. I referred earlier in this sermon to the God who is sometimes "too much with us." You know that I believe God is with us. But a god who can be manipulated by those who come to pay homage is a god who has been too domesticated, too tamed. A god who is "our god" is too much with us. Such a god, who is not God at all – should be removed.

It was that kind of God to whom Herod sought to pay homage. One that Herod could control – in fact, could kill.⁹ It is such a God that politicians and religionists of every stripe seek to pay homage – even when they don't know they are doing so. So insidious is the nature of idolatry – putting anything in the place of God. When President Bush so frequently used religious language in defense of his administration, he wasn't being intentionally hypocritical. But Jesus' message is not one that can be co-opted by this State or any other – for no matter how sincere the intent of the powers that be, they are the Powers that be. And Power will always seek its own good. This is not the message of Jesus. When the current president, who has reportedly invoked the name of God even more than his highly religious predecessor, (when Obama) speaks religiously... we ought to be equally wary. For Power cannot pay homage to love, and love remain pure.¹⁰

⁹ I am alluding to Herod's "slaughter of the innocent," in which he ordered that all male babies be killed – this in an effort to removed any chance that the magi's infant king would grow up to challenge his kingly power.

¹⁰ I have lost the internet citations, but several sites reported on the frequently-religious language used by President Obama. The same good PRBC Republican who took me to task over the bowing illustration also did so over my "slap" at President Bush. I responded to this ardent supporter of mine (yes, really!) that I was not slapping at Bush – but equally criticizing both the Republican and the Democratic President for their usage of religious language, which I always find concerning. Of course any President has a right to be religious (and my support in so being) – but he (or, one day, she) does not come to office as the nation's Pastor. The Presidential position is, by definition, a secular post, and as the leader of a pluralistic country, whose founding fathers demanded the freedom of religion, has a responsibility to be the President for all. Religious language should be used sparingly by the President, if at all, out of respect for Americans of all religions (as well as the non-religious), and because invoking religion so often

So as we celebrate Epiphany – which is the revelation of God’s light in Jesus to the world – we ought to do so, every where, and in every way that such light shines. Through the kind word. The simple gesture. The powerless expressions of love – which are the most powerful acts in the world. And we ought to be alert, always, to the ways that Power Comes to Pay Homage. If it does so in the name of American government – we ought to reject it. If it does so in the name of American Christianity – we ought to reject it. If it does so under the cover of the darkness of our own hearts – may God expose such hypocrisy to the Light of Christ – that true light may shine – even in our own works (see Matthew 5.16).

Lord Acton said, “Power tends to corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”¹¹ He is absolutely right. So let us be aware when Power Comes to Pay Homage, and let us seek only to practice the love of the child, who grew up to *lay down his life for his friends* (John 15.13).

May it be so!

abuses the purpose of religion – making it to do the bidding of partisan politics. God is neither Republican nor Democrat, neither Capitalist nor Communist – and any language that implies otherwise (as religiously political rhetoric so often does) makes God into our image. I cite two of the Ten Commandments: *You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God...* (Exodus 20.4, 7).

¹¹ The quotation from John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton (1834-1902), is from a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”