

A real Saviour for the real world. Matt. 2:13-23

The world we live in

Matthew 2:¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children, and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more

Some of you hear of the state murder of these children and think – well, that proves Jesus wasn't born into a fairy tale but the real world, the world we live in, where children are always suffering and dying at the hands of violent adults, caught up in affairs and conflicts not of their making

Sadly, that's true, isn't it

Boko Haram kidnaps children from their dormitories to wage war against the Nigerian government

A bomb goes off in Kabul and children die in the market place

Closer to home

A controlling violent estranged father in Queensland sets alight his wife and children in their car

Three children die in what is now thought to be a murder suicide in Tullamarine

Ours is a world where children continue to be the casualties of adults competing for power, trying to ensure their own power and control – and Jesus is born into our world

But others hear the story and just its reading raises some unsettling questions about God

Doesn't God bear some responsibility for their deaths

He Sent the star

And following the star the Wise Men came to Jerusalem with their questions about the one born king of the Jews– and they tipped off Herod. There would have been no deaths without their questions

And God knew what Herod would do, knew what would happen and warned Joseph, made it possible for Jesus to escape v. 13

And if God can rescue Jesus, warn Joseph so that the family heads off to the safety of Egypt, couldn't he, shouldn't he, have rescued those other children, done something to prevent this atrocity

Why couldn't He have done something else? Why this way – saving one, letting others die?

What God ought to do.

Thinking about those slaughtered boys of Bethlehem and why God has acted and not acted as it is revealed He has, for many of us taps into the bigger and more general question - why if God is in control do these bad things still happen, why doesn't he just end the violence, why does He let children keep dying at the hands of wicked adults?

Not an abstract issue.

For some it comes from a deep well of grief, for others from an anguished horror at the cruelty of our world

And when we hear of these atrocities, even if it is not a personal issue for us, people's questioning can plant a seed of doubt about God's goodness in our own hearts, and their fault finding with God can leave us unsettled.

So today we will consider together what perhaps we think and others say God ought to do when faced with the evil of a Herod, before looking at what God has and is doing in response to that evil

Always better to put into words our questions – so that we can answer them

And in this case it will help us to see why what God has done, as opposed to what people think He ought to do, is so much better.

Welcome continuing the conversation with you

You will need to work with me

When we read what happens, see that it appears those children died as a consequence of God's action in the world, of the birth of Jesus and the star to mark His birth, one option is to think God should never act if his action will provoke evil people to do wrong.

But that is a bit like saying you should never buy a good car because the consequence might be someone stealing it.

And we need to be clear – those children died as a consequence of Herod's evil will

God did not command Herod to kill these children, in fact God has explicitly forbidden their murder

But a thief stealing my car is just a possibility, God knows what Herod will do.

So should we not do good things because some will turn it for evil?

Not have a child because it will further embitter someone who can have no children.

Not teach people to write because some will write lies

IF we couldn't do good because others would make it an opportunity to do evil we would be imprisoned in the evil of other peoples hearts

To say God should not act if Evil people would respond wickedly to what He does – would be saying He should never act

Including never act to deal with evil

Never do good

The problem is not with God's action, but with the evil in Herod's heart, in human hearts

Well then, God should have acted to Stop Herod. How?

Perhaps he should have done something to prevent the evil consequences of Herod's decision

Give all the parents a warning in a dream so they can escape, go out of town?

Or cause the soldiers to get lost on the way to Bethlehem? [2 Kings 6:11-23]

Whatever – Herod can act wickedly, but God should prevent the evil consequences of his actions

But why just for these Bethlehem parents?

If it is not right for God to rescue Jesus alone, why would it be right for him to rescue these parents alone, of all the parents in the world whose children suffer because of the wickedness of others?

Saying God should act to prevent the consequences of Herod's evil actions is saying that, as a general rule, God should act to stop the bad consequences for others of people's evil actions

That when people push others off cliffs, God should be there forever putting mattresses at the bottom.

Let's think that through

Of Which actions should HE prevent the consequences?

Only those with really bad consequences

Or all actions with bad consequences

So, for example, every time someone is distracted while driving their car by Playing with their phone God should grab the steering wheel?

No you say. That's ridiculous.

He should Only do it when the inattention might cause a fatality.

But why just then?

But someone might be really traumatised by being run into – even if they live. Who wats to live with an acquired brain injury, or suffer months of rehab.

Ok. God should grab the wheel whenever someone might get seriously hurt.

But why stop there?

Perhaps the distracted driver is emotionally fragile and the Hassle of repair might be overwhelming for them, the straw that breaks the camel's back – and they have a nervous breakdown that puts them out of action in their family for months, and the children are traumatised by their parents absence

When you are saying that God should step in and prevent the bad consequences of Herod's action you are saying that God should stop all the bad consequences of all our actions

That he should be putting the mattresses at the bottom of the cliff not just for when people push others over, but when we slip, or when we jump

But if we were never left with the consequences of our actions – how would we learn?

How would we learn to choose the good?

If our actions were separated from their consequences It would soon make us indifferent to whether our actions were good or evil, perhaps prevent us from ever confronting the evil in our hearts

If our actions were separated from their consequences all our actions would lose their moral significance

We would lose our moral significance, cease to be people who had the dignity of responsibility and accountability

So while it sounds like it makes sense to demand God step in to stop this or that, to make intermittent interventions to prevent harm, that would make God's actions completely arbitrary and undermines our humanity. It is not a workable solution to human evil

And the Problem would still remain – and that is Herod and his evil will that seeks to preserve his rule and defy God's.

At this point some advocate the Rambo solution - Stop Herod by killing him

But another Herod would come, and may be worse

And remember what we say God should do for these children he should do for all

This is saying God should remove all Herods, destroy, remove, all those who would misuse their power to harm others

When?

After they have demonstrated their evil, shown their true colours?

Surely not. How could one massacre be acceptable?

So should God destroy them when they start to think of harming others?

But why wait? God knows everything.

So aren't we saying God should destroy them pre-emptively, before they have had any opportunity to do the harm God knows they will do?

Delete Herods and people like him from the human inventory

But why stop at Herods, people with a lot of power who can do a lot of harm?

Why shouldn't we have God act against anyone who misuses their power?

Bullying?

Hitting a kid in the playground?

Cutting someone off in traffic?

And what about someone who just desires to hurt someone else but has no opportunity

And why just those who abuse power in terms of physical threat or violence?

What about those who have power in their tongue, in their eloquence

Saying unkind and hurtful things? Manipulate mobs?

Deceivers

Or those who have power in terms of knowledge, knowledge that allows them to get more than their fair share of the world's resources, that perpetrates economic violence?

Or the financial power that allows them to impose unfair trading conditions?

At what level would doing wrong to others become right? – so that we let those who do it keep living?

White lies? Petty theft? Unkindness masked by humour?

You see where I'm going

When you want god to remove Herod, aren't you wanting Him to destroy all who do evil and wrong, because any wrong impoverishes and destroys others

That is a lot of people – and it probably includes you.

It this is your solution maybe you want God to send a flood and get rid of all evildoers

IN the Bible story God's done that, and it was because of human violence

Genesis 6:13 God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth."

Gen. 6:11, 13 - and nothing changed, or at least people didn't change

Genesis 6:5 The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 8:21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done.

Every imagination of their heart was still evil from their youth

To say God should solve the problem of evil by knocking off evil people, people who do wrong – is to will your own destruction.

So perhaps he shouldn't have made people at all, or He can be faulted for not creating us differently? Some people suggest that.

Why didn't He create people who never did wrong?

Why did he create people with the qualities they have?

If we are honest that is a question we can't answer. We are not God. We don't see the end from the beginning.

But in creating people as finite embodied personal spirits who can relate to Him and others in freely willed relationships of love, He created us as people who could hear His word, trust it, and obey it

For knowing what God said, believing it, and obeying it are a large part of loving God

Just as communication and trust are a large part of loving each other.

The possibility of loving relationship is at the heart of what it is to be human

But where we can believe, we can disbelieve

Where we can obey, we can disobey

And where we can love, we can misdirect our love.

You would have done it differently? But how?

And why do you think you know better, that you are in a position to judge?

Do you know what would be lost if we were not created free to love, and so able to misdirect our love?

Do you know what might not be?

Do you know what may never come about?

Do you know the end from the beginning?

Claiming that God should never have created as He did may reinforce a sense of moral superiority – but a response to evil that suggests the solution is our never being or our total destruction, seems no solution at all.

At this stage you might throw up your hands and say

I know I'm not God, but God is God. HE is meant to be all knowing and all powerful, so He should just fix things.

That is progress if you really mean it.

If you really do acknowledge you are not God, and can acknowledge that because He is all knowing and all powerful He might go about things in ways that may not have occurred to you, ways that might seem strange to you. That's progress

You have moved beyond insisting that God has to prove Himself to you by running the universe the way you think it should be run, by doing what makes sense to you. That god would be an idol; the creation of a creature

Unable to help, with no more power and insight than its creator

Hopeless to deal with evil – for we need help

For evil, human evil, is real

And it is grievous

And we can't solve it – thousands of years, yet it persists in every society, even those that think they are enlightened

And when you meet a Herod, see what they do, the problem with getting caught up with what you think God should or shouldn't do, is you miss what the living and true God has actually done.

What God has done

What Has HE done to deal with the evil in the world?

We are reading about it. HE has sent Jesus His Son into our world, Immanuel, God with us.

He has committed Himself to personally dealing with the sorrows of our world.

How is Jesus a response to the Herod's of this world?

A response to people misusing what they have to harm and mistreat others?

A baby born to poor parents, needing to escape from Herod, seems so weak, feeble

We know Jesus grew up and opposed violence and selfishness in his teaching

Taught people to love one another, to love even their enemies

TO forgive and not take vengeance

To not seek their own power and privilege but to be ready to serve

And He called for repentance, for people to change and commit themselves to doing what HE taught

And we know in His ministry He didn't mock or minimise suffering, saying it was just an illusion, or that the problem was our longing for justice and life

He healed and restored

But he didn't raise a righteous army to wreak vengeance [some wanted Him to John 6:15 – to make Him King by force] He left the Herods in place.

So how does Jesus make a difference?

He still looks pretty weak against the might of Herod

In fact his ministry had no impact on Herod and his like, those with power in our world

Herod's son Antipas – just saw Jesus as potential entertainment Luke 23:6-8

Pilate the Roman governor – as a political difficulty

Initially they ignore Him, and when it becomes necessary for the preservation of their power, they kill Jesus whom they say is innocent of any crime. They crucify Him

Jesus becomes the victim of power used for political ends, power to keep the rulers – whether it was the Jewish authorities or the Roman governor – in power.

At the end of the story Jesus died for the same reason as those children were killed

Those in power seeking to stay in power

Having once escaped Herod he finally suffers the injustice and cruelty of the reign of the Herods of this world

If Jesus is God's response to the evil of human power misused – it seems so weak.

Some at this point say – yes – but isn't it good that Jesus knows our suffering, that He is not indifferent, not removed, not distant from what we go through

We can know for sure that He knows us and can sympathise with our powerlessness and grief

But if that is all that is happening in Jesus' suffering and death, it is not enough, is it

We want something done about the Herods, something done about the evil in the world

Sympathy alone is not enough

When I started medicine I was very sympathetic to people who had stomach bugs, were vomiting

When that stale acidic smell got up my nose and hit the back of my throat

I would start gagging, and unless I left the room – worse would follow

I had sympathetic vomiting –

It was no help to my patients at all to know I was experiencing the same thing as them, that I sympathised

In fact sympathy alone was useless.

If in the end all we get from God is a sympathetic Jesus – who knows what it feels like to be one of us - useless

But a sympathetic Jesus is not all we get

The cross seems so weak, so powerless before human power, but the gospel tells us much more is happening on the cross than Jesus' removal as an irritant to those in power.

It tells us Christ died for our sins, that His death was purposeful

That He was buried – a real death

And That He rose from the dead, that death was no end.

And when we believe the gospel, accept it as it is - true

What Seems so weak is revealed as the power of God, the power of God that ensures the end of all human wickedness – and more

In the events of Easter we see God keeping His word

His word of judgment on sin. In showing mercy that word that says sin deserves death – is kept, for sin is punished in the death of Jesus. The crucifixion tells us that word will always be kept - there will be no overlooking of sin, and our sin will be either punished in Christ, or we will bear its punishment ourselves

His word of the promise of salvation, for in believing the gospel sinners are forgiven through the death of Jesus, they are reconciled to God, find peace with God. But that promised salvation is a big salvation – it is not just about saving you and me. It is a promise of resurrection and new creation, a new creation where evil will be removed forever, where there will be life without hurt or wrong

His word of the promise of a Saviour, a King who will defeat all the enemies of God and His people. ON the cross Jesus has cast down the devil and destroyed His power, set free His people

from the power of sin and the judgment of the law, and He has guaranteed in His own resurrection their resurrection, their sharing in His triumph over death.

The events of Easter ensure the judgement of evil.

More – it ensures the end of all evil

For the crucified and risen Jesus is triumphant – over the devil and his lies and murder, and over those who embrace in their lies, hatred and murder, the devil's rule

And His triumph is complete for they are Exposed, despite appearances, as powerless to stop God doing what He says

In killing Jesus His enemies have guaranteed their own destruction

He has Triumphed over evil through evil

Think of the extent of that victory

Justice from injustice – for the innocent Jesus is vindicated in the resurrection, made the just judge of all

Life from death – not more of the same, but deathless, immortal life, life where death has no power

Truth demonstrated where lies reigned, for through those lies the words of Jesus are shown to be the words of God, never broken

More, the cross guarantees redemption

Sinners like you and I and all who repent and believe the gospel are not abandoned, condemned. We are transformed by the powerful Spirit of God. The crucified and risen Jesus can do what no punishment can do – He can give a new heart, make the wicked good

But more, the cross guarantees the redemption of our time – for in the cross and resurrection we see our saving God has an almighty power and wisdom that can take an evil act, and make it at the same time the best act – life giving, mercy bringing, truth establishing

This is the guarantee that all things will work for good for those who love the LORD, and that there will come a day when every tear will be wiped away.

Have you thought about that.

The cross is saying more than that God brings good from evil

Our tears will be wiped away because we will be brought to see all of the events of our lives, even the most terrible, as Scripture teaches us to see the cross

As things that the evil meant for evil, but which the LORD in His wisdom and power meant for good, and that it was His good that was done

That tears will be wiped away by coming to understand the place of the cause of those tears in God's good purpose for us.

The disciples tears were wiped away by the same act that caused them, the death of Jesus, when they saw that there God's power and wisdom was at work

It wasn't just the resurrection. The resurrection revealed to them the truth of the cross

The resurrection would have been terror without the death for sin

To meet as risen King the one you had abandoned, the one you had failed – would make them want to hide

Unless this risen King was gracious and merciful and in His grace had atoned for your sin, even the sin of abandoning Him, of faithlessness

Abusing power to stay in power by killing the innocent Jesus was wicked, but His death is also good, the best

The wickedness comes from our wicked wills, the goodness from our God's overwhelming, incomparable goodness and wisdom and power

And what Scripture shows to be true of the cross will one day be revealed as true of all of our lives, all redeemed by Jesus' death and resurrection – to our great humbling, and to His eternal praise.

Such a rich Hope for those who believe the gospel

Died for sins

Buried

Raised

Hope of eternal life, hope of life without evil, hope of redemption of our lives

Without believing the gospel Jesus' death is just another horror in the world's litany of horrors – that we can never redeem

But the gospel is true, it is the living God's gospel, the proclamation of the victory of His Son, Jesus, God with us

And with it He gives to a world that knows the grief of never ending Herods Hope, not of the end of creation, but of a new creation – where there will be no evil

Hope Not of death, but of life

Hope of tears gone forever

One rescued baby amongst the multitude who have died

One crucified innocent, amongst all the executed

So weak, but so powerful

For this is Jesus, God with us, God come to save His people by destroying the evil one [the power of death], defeating death, exposing the lie

Born into the real world to be the Real world Saviour

To give hope in our real world

When you look at evil in our world you can find fault – pretend you know how God ought to act, or you would do it better [I wonder if people who know you would agree?]

Or you can look at what God has done in sending His Son into the world

And confess God is More radical

In His intolerance of evil

In his determination to remove it

In his commitment to life

Than you

That God is more wise and powerful than you can imagine

So much Better – good through and through

And humble yourself before Him and confess with joy that Jesus is Lord

Embracing what God has done

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus – and in our sad world want real hope, a hope that is not just wishful thinking, a hope for creation, a hope that is marked by justice

If you want truth – a reliable word

If you want goodness – deep, rich, goodness

Come to Jesus –

The opposite of every Herod

Who wins by humbling Himself to death

Who ascends to rule by the power of an indestructible life, not by the power of giving death to others

He lives – ask Him to forgive you your love of self, and give you hope

And if you are a believer

Don't be easily shaken by people finding fault with God, asking what He is doing about this or that tragedy

He has acted to end evil, and has guaranteed both its judgment and its end in the death and resurrection of His Son.

When you are confronted, as we are, by evil

Whether in our own suffering – and Jesus said His followers would suffer in this world, or that of others

Turn to Him

Think on Him,

There is so much we cannot know, but we do know that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ

Especially think on the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus to be refreshed in the goodness, might and wisdom of our God

And to be strengthened in hope

For in the cross, as you are joined to Jesus by faith, you will know your own suffering to be purposeful as His was,

Working that good that the almighty and wise and loving God works for His people in all things,

And assured of a glorious outcome when our God raises you with Christ and wipes every tear from our eye.