

## Sermon for Morning Prayer The First Sunday after the Epiphany

### Lessons: <sup>i</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the sixtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. <sup>ii</sup>

“Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian [**MIDD-ee-unn**] and Ephah [**EE-fah**], all they from Sheba [**Shee-BAH**] shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar [**KEY-darr**] shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth [**Knee-BYE-oth**] shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish [**TARR-shish**] first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the LORD thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew. <sup>iii</sup>

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they

said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.<sup>iv</sup> Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.”<sup>v</sup>

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Homily:**

We cannot expect that these wise men, coming as they did from what is now Iran, would be familiar with the domestic politics of Roman-occupied Palestine during the reign of the first *Princeps* [PRIN-kepps], Octavius Caesar whom we know by his title “Augustus”.

However, we know, as the wise men then did not, that there was a subtext buried behind this exchange between them and Herod. For, as we know, Herod had no intention of “worshipping” the Christ Child when he found him; instead, he intended to murder One whom he saw as a threat to his kingship.

As a puppet king who existed at the sufferance of his Roman overlords, Herod's position was not ideal, but, even with its disadvantages, it was a great deal better than working for a living. As we see even in our own time, there is no political office so mean and troublesome that its incumbent will willingly surrender it; instead, he or she will fight tooth and nail to retain a feeding place at the public trough.

Herod's problem in retaining his power and position was not the Romans; so long as he kept the peace and paid the taxes, the Romans would leave him in power to save themselves the trouble of administering his province directly. Rather, his problem was just that: keeping the peace, because the Jews universally saw him as a usurper, an illegitimate claimant to be king in a land where only a descendant of King David could properly sit on a throne.

Herod was not only not a descendant of David's, actually, he was not even a Jew, at least as far as descent went. While he himself followed the Jewish religion, he and his family were Idumaeans [*Idd-you-MEE-unz*], coming from the territory anciently called Edom [*EE-dumm*]. That lay in what is today the Kingdom of Jordan, being southeast of Palestine, across the Great Rift fault and running from the Dead Sea south to Aqabah [*Uh-KABB-uh*].<sup>vi</sup>

Thus the Herodian kings suffered from a sort of "double whammy" as far as their claims to rule Palestine went: they were not only not descendants of the required Davidic line, but they were actually foreigners, coming from a people that was an ancient enemy of the Israelites'.

It is an ancient custom for insecure rulers to murder potential rivals. From English history, we have the famous example of "the Princes in the Tower", nephews of King Richard III, who were undoubtedly murdered. They were probably murdered at the orders of Henry Tudor, King Henry VII, the military usurper who defeated and killed Richard, because their claim to the throne was far more legitimate than was Henry's.

Thus Herod, the intruded civil ruler, feared the rumor of the birth of the Christ Child, the divine ruler. In this, Herod serves as a "type", or Biblical forerunner, of the false rulers who have, from time to time, bedeviled the New Testament Church. Just as there was a dichotomy between Herod's secular, political preoccupations and Christ's spiritual ones, where Herod threatened the physical lives of the children of Bethlehem, these false overseers threaten the souls of those they mislead.

There were always a few of these among us, as the results of various schisms [SIZZ-umz] in the Church, but they have been particularly prevalent since the end of the Nineteenth and beginning of the Twentieth Century, when an Englishman named Arnold Harris Mathew discovered, or re-discovered, the formula for becoming a “do-it-yourself” bishop”.

The Church’s repeated struggles with schismatic [sizz-MATT-ick] bishops illustrate the twin problems that false ecclesiastical leaders create. These twin problems correspond to the two forms of schism [SIZZ-um], that is, schisms [SIZZ-umz] that arise from disputes over the *authority* of the Church and schisms [SIZZ-umz] that arise from disputes over the *teachings* of the Church.

The first of these problems, as with Herod’s desperate attempts to hang on to his political position, is the problem of *authority* and *jurisdiction*. The authority of Christ was passed, through His Apostles, to the Church He founded, which is the “One, Holy, Catholick and Apostolick Church”<sup>vii</sup> to which we appeal in the Creeds. When a bishop goes into schism [SIZZ-um], that is, cuts himself off from the mainstream of that Catholic – or “universal” – Church, he loses any claim to possess the authority or to exercise the jurisdiction that Christ conferred on His Church.

But if a man who, in his own person, has been ordained to the episcopate, thereafter separates himself from the Church which appointed him to one of its Offices, what is left of his episcopate? Clearly, he is no longer an Officer of the Church Catholic, so he no longer has any function to perform on behalf of the Body of Christ. Thereafter, any so-called “episcopal” acts he may perform, such as confirmations or ordinations, are not acts of the Church but only personal acts of the Church’s former Officer.

This is one of the key signs that distinguish those whom we call *episcopes vagantes* [ee-PIS-koh-pee vuh-GANN-tayz], which is Latin for “wandering bishops”. They do not act on behalf of any actual, subsisting portion of the wider Church; instead, they operate as though the Episcopal Office were some sort of personal magic that resides, literally, in their hands.<sup>viii</sup>

Where these men have no legitimate functions to perform on behalf of the Church, they are prone to run around “laying hands suddenly” on any men they can persuade to stand still long enough for purported ordinations or consecrations, as

though repeatedly acting out a bishop's role will somehow validate their claims to be such.

This not only dangerously confuses the laity as to where the true Church may be found but it produces a host of unqualified, or at best semi-qualified, purported clergy, none of whom have any pastorates to exercise and all of whom have accepted their dubious clerical titles more for personal aggrandizement than for the service of Christ's flock.

Previously, we referred to two sorts of problems that correspond to the two forms of schism [**SIZZ-um**]. The second of these problems is the problem of *doctrine* and *teaching*. Once a man has left the structure of the Church Catholic, he has thrown off the safeguards that structure imposes to assure that its authorized ministers hold and teach only "that which has been believed always, and everywhere, and by all".

Then it is almost always a temptation impossible for the schismatic [*sizz-MATT-ick*] bishop to resist, for him to ride into the ground his own personal doctrinal, liturgical, and theological hobby horses. The longer a particular schism [**SIZZ-um**] lasts, the farther its leaders tend to stray from authentic Catholic teaching,<sup>ix</sup> but often startling deviations can be observed even in the first man to leave the Catholic fold.<sup>x</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

Lacking the actual authority of the Church and teaching untrustworthy doctrines, these schismatic [*sizz-MATT-ick*] and *vagantes* [*vuh-GANN-tayz*] bishops threaten the spiritual well-being of those who entrust themselves to such oversight. But, just as Herod was prepared to resort to murder to maintain himself in office, these men will use any lie, misdirection, trick, or twisted version of history to protect their counterfeit bishopric.

The best protection for the people of the Church is to entrust their welfare only to those who follow the star of He Who was born King of the Jews. That is, it is within the Catholic Church that the assurance of salvation is to be found and it is there that Our Lord has appointed to be administered His Sacraments, which are His chosen means of making real God's presence in this world.

So, whenever you encounter someone who claims to be a Bishop of the Church, ask yourself two questions:

One, does this man occupy an Office that was conferred by the Church and that functions in the service of the Church, or does he treat his title as a mere personal dignity or distinction?

Two, does this man practice and teach only that which the Catholic Church has always practiced and taught, or does he follow idiosyncratic practices and doctrines of his own devising?

If the answer to either of these questions is “Yes”, then run. Run as far and as fast as you can in the opposite direction.

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister<sup>xi</sup>  
January 10, 2010.*

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<sup>i</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, 1943).*

<sup>ii</sup> *Isaiah 60: 1-9 (KJV). If Epiphany I falls on January 13, read Isaiah 60: 10 instead.*

<sup>iii</sup> *St. Matthew 2: 1-12 (KJV).*

<sup>iv</sup> *Cf. Micah 5: 2. See also St. John 7: 42.*

<sup>v</sup> *St. Matthew 2: 7-8 (KJV).*

<sup>vi</sup> *PAUL J. ACHEMEIER, ED., HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY 246-47 and 00 (HarperSanFrancisco 1985), s.v. "Edom", "Edomites", "Idumaea" and "Idumaeans".*

<sup>vii</sup> *The Nicene Creed, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 230 (Church of the Province of South Africa 1954). This is quoted from that Book, one of several traditional editions that are authorized for use in the Anglican Catholic Church, because it restores the word "Holy" to the "Marks of the Church" as recited in the Creed. This word was omitted through a printer's error in 1549 and, such is the conservatism of traditional Anglicans, that misprint was slavishly copied right down through the 1928 American edition.*

<sup>viii</sup> *Another such infallible sign is a predilection for multiple ordinations and consecrations under the pretext of "sharing lines of consecration" or "improving lines of succession".*

<sup>ix</sup> *A prime example is the so-called "Brazilian Catholic Church". In the 1940s a Bishop Duarte Costa left the Roman Catholic Church, partly over that Church's help to fleeing Nazi war criminals. One of Duarte Costa's own consecrands was accepted as valid by, and later received back into, the Roman Church. There he not only served as a bishop but attended the Second Vatican Council as the only married Bishop there. Within forty years, however, the schismatic branch of Duarte Costa's succession had so decayed theologically and*

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*ecclesiologically that some of its “bishops” have not only purported to “ordain” women but have simply lied to both their ordinands and to the public, saying they were making these women “priests” in the Roman Catholic Church rather than in their own schismatic body.*

<sup>x</sup> *Thus one former ACC bishop used to demand that his “Anglican” clergy use only the Gregorian Canon of Consecration. Another ACC reject omitted the Prayer Book version of the Nicene Creed in favor of an idiosyncratic text of his own composition.*

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