

1] King Herod the Great and St Paul the Apostle were very different characters. Herod who, as a client king under the Romans, reigned over Judea, was an Idumean Arab. Not having a Jewish Mother, he was a convert to Judaism but for clear political reasons. Many Judeans at the time regarded him suspiciously and certainly, his way of life and despotic rule earned him the contempt of the Jewish population. He was not known as a zealous and devout follower of the Law of Moses.

2] He did, however, enlarge the temple in Jerusalem, building on the temple mount, of which the Western Wall remains to this day. This was the temple, you will remember, of which one of His disciples said to Our Lord, 'Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!' To which Jesus replied, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down.' [Mk.13:1-2] Such would be the legacy of a man who had members of his own family executed, including his second wife, Mariamne.

3] St Paul, on the other hand, as Saul of Tarsus was a devout Jew in the tradition of the pharisees. Well educated and a tent maker by profession, he was zealous for the Law of Moses, and with a certain civic pride could claim the status of a citizen of the Roman Empire.

4] One thing, however, these two men had in common: they had both tried, in their own way to put an end to the gospel; to stop it in its tracks; to silence the good news of the kingdom of God and the reign of His Christ.

5] Though there is no record outside the New Testament of the slaughter of the Innocents - some of whose relics I will remind you, we have in our Animension Cloth on the Holy Table - absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and the slaughter was certainly within Herod's capabilities and in keeping with his character. Fearing a usurper; thinking one had been born to seize

his kingship from him, he sought the life of the new born king of the Jews. But as the old English proverb says, man proposes but God disposes. The Messiah was not to be so early and so easily silenced. The time for that would come, but even that would only herald His resurrection in glory.

6] And St Paul, when still known as Saul of Tarsus, seized his opportunity when the Church herself was a new born. Authorised to seize followers of The Way, as it was called, in order to drag them before the Jewish Council, for what must have seemed to him the worship of an imposter and false Messiah. There had been many of those before and, no doubt there would be many after this Nazarene.

But despite the best efforts of both Herod and Saul, the future apostle came to believe, later on, that in Christ he had found the mystery of godliness, as he writes to Timothy:

‘God was manifested in the flesh,  
Justified in the Spirit,  
Seen by angels,  
Preached among the Gentiles,  
Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.’

[1 Tim:3:16]

7] But where Herod failed in his schemes, to live out the rest of his days in paranoia and the agony of a painful and final illness, Paul, by contrast, ended by promoting and establishing in the gentile world the very faith he had at first despised. For Paul was converted, turned around, turned upside down, being summoned by grace. ‘So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers,’ He tells us. ‘But... He who had... called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles.’

8] How should we comment on this? The gospel has always suffered threats. The mission and life Church has, from the beginning endured all kinds of indifference, scorn and outright persecution, but the gates of hell have never prevailed. But these things are external. What does St Peter tell us? ‘If you are

reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.' [1 Pet.4:14-16]

9] None of this can defeat the gospel, for the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. Even if we die for Christ, it is our gain, for we shall have reached our goal, we shall have attained the kingdom of God. Nothing from outside can overcome the Church.

9] I shall tell you from where the real danger to us comes. Far worse is when the fault for any indifference or scorn or negligence should originate in ourselves. As Peter continues, 'For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?' [1 Pet.4:17]

10] For lack of watchfulness and a faithful Orthodox mind, churches have crumbled from within. But you and I have come here to renew in ourselves that mystery of godliness found in Christ's incarnation and birth, and as with Paul, we likewise do not receive a gift that came from any man nor, in the end, is the mystery taught, but it is imparted by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, for it comes to us by the revelation of Jesus Christ.