

## SERMON - FLIGHT INTO EGYPT, Matthew 2:13-23, December 31, 2017

At the time that our Savior was born, Rome had conquered most of the world. Judea, Israel and Jerusalem were conquered in 63 BC. In 57 BC the territory was divided into five administrative districts. This was done in order to destabilize the nation and thus make certain that popular resistance would be impossible. At the time of conquest, Israel was ruled by the Hasmonean dynasty, who were descendants of the Maccabees. They were not of the blood line of King David, who were the rightful royal heirs of the throne of Israel. I explained last Sunday when we read the genealogy of our Lord that the only authentic royal dynasty were the descendants of King David, and it was only from this blood line that the Messiah could be born. The Romans, who managed Judea's political, military, and fiscal affairs, appointed ethnarchs to assist in governing the various districts. "Ethnarch" in Greek means "ruler of the nation." One of these ethnarchs was Herod, who was of no royal dynasty, neither Hasmonean nor davidic. Herod was an Idumean; a people who were conquered by the Hasmoneans and forcibly converted to Judaism. Herod's summary methods of justice caused him to clash with the Jewish authorities, who complained to Rome, but to no avail. The Parthians conquered Judea in 40 BC and reappointed a Hasmonean King, Antigonus II. Herod escaped to Rome and persuaded the Roman senate to declare him King of Judea, promising to expel the Parthians and re-establish Roman rule. Victorious over the Parthians, Herod had the Hasmonean King Antigonus beheaded. Although Herod now ruled Judea and usurped the title of king, he was in fact only a petty vassal subject to Roman authority. This was the historical background which surrounded the birth of the rightful davidic King and Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Herod learned of the birth of Jesus from the Wisemen, and it is no surprise that he seeks to have Jesus killed. Only hours old in the world, the new born Messiah almost immediately becomes a refugee. The Christ child, His Mother, the Theotokos, her betrothed, the 80 year old Joseph, and Joseph's son James, are forced to flee into Egypt. Herod, evil, scheming and unscrupulous, unable to locate Jesus, orders that all the male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger be slain. It is said that when Caesar Augustus heard what Herod had done, the Roman emperor said, "Under Herod it is better to be an unclean animal than a man or a child."

What can we learn from today's Gospel? For one thing, every joy in life, no matter how great and wonderful, will be accompanied by some pain and suffering. That is part of our human condition. We should not be scandalized by this but should understand that this is permitted by God for our salvation. We can also learn that no matter how terrible and awful someone may behave and no matter what evil a person or persons may perpetrate in order to get their own way, no one can fight against God. No one can change what God allows or does not allow, or what God wills or does not will. Threats can be made, blood can be spilled, but in the end God and righteousness are victorious. The 14,000 innocent children slain today are translated into Heaven as martyrs, having suffered on account of Christ's sake. They are the first in a long line of martyrs even up until today, killed and being killed for the sake of Christ. We can also examine Herod's character as an example of how we should not be. Herod was an ambitious scoundrel who sought power and glory, and he didn't care whose head he walked on in order to achieve his ambitions. In the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian that we read so often during Great Lent, we ask the Lord to deliver us from "lust of power." Herod was a very suspicious and mistrustful man. He believed that the Wisemen had mocked him and were laughing at him, when in reality they were only following the will of God, who revealed to them not to inform Herod of Jesus's whereabouts and to quietly return to their own country. They did not trick, mock or laugh at Herod, although that was his perception and belief. The Russian word for Herod's character is <подозрительный>. This is translated as "suspicious, shady, fishy, mistrustful." Metropolitan Philaret Vosnessensky of blessed memory said that an evil person sees evil in everything - evil maliciousness, and evil intentions, no matter what a person may say or do. Even if one were to do or say the opposite, the suspicious person

would still see the same evil with the same judgement. St. John of Kronstadt warns us to flee from evil suspiciousness as if from fire! Satan wants to catch you in his net and cause you to misinterpret and misunderstand every deed and to see things in an incorrect and untruthful light. Metropolitan Philaret warns us that this doesn't mean that we should call white "black" and black "white". It does, however, mean that we should never allow the disposition of our souls to become such that we see evil in everything. Therefore, brothers and sisters, during these festal days, we are shown the example of Herod as a warning to never allow this type of suspiciousness and mistrust to create its evil lair in our hearts. Amen.