

Pray Sermon Jan 10.21 Series: Apologetics in the 21st Century.1 by Pastor Kit Greaves

How do you defend your faith in a sometimes-hostile world? We begin a Series today on apologetics in the 21st century, that is giving an answer to those who comment or ask about faith, a sermon series that is a response to people telling me about conversations at family gatherings or work colleagues who might joke about the Christian faith you cherish or the church you love. What do you say? I'll offer 3 practical steps.

When Jesus was born, there were two reactions as we read in Matthew ch 2: worship and hostility. Worship by the magi. Hostility by King Herod.

I have visited the Capitol Building in Washington DC on two occasions: the first time when I was 16, the metal detector dinged before I entered the Visitor's Gallery of the House of Representatives. I forgot I had a pocket knife in the pants pocket. "Next time," the guard said, "leave your knife at home." He gave it back to me on the way out. That seems like a very long time ago. The second time visiting the Capital building a few years back, a friend I was visiting knew someone who was working for a State Senator and he gave us access to the hallowed halls of the Senate Chamber that was not in session, unescorted. No pocket knife. I sat at former at the desk of JF Kennedy.

I imagine you were as shocked and horrified as I was to see reports this past Wed, Epiphany Day, from Washington. As the surging mob of thugs, puppets incited by the puppeteer in chief, waving Trump flags, stormed up the marble steps of the Capitol building, overwhelming the security guards, their victory hollow. This is it? I can hear them asking. Sure, it's an impressive stone rotunda surrounded by walls of paintings of long-dead white, male American Presidents, the Senate chamber with a hundred old wooden desks in rows like a large school classroom all facing a platform, under which desks hid understandably frightened Senators and up in the visitor's gallery. This is it, I can imagine the brazen flag wavers say? This is the seat of political power? You see, in their ignorance, wielding the blunt weapon of insurrection and violence, you can storm a building, but you can't kill an idea.

King Herod suffered a similar delusion. Sure, he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him by news of foreign dignitaries, magi from the east, arriving in the capital, searching for the child born king of the Jews. When the magi stopped in to ask King Herod for directions - did you notice, they did not bring Herod any gifts? I wonder if the irony suddenly dawned on them - asking a King of the Jews for the location of the birth of another King of the Jews. Hmm. Never missing a trick, always the survivor, King Herod pulls the magi aside and says quietly, "when you find him, report back to me so I may come and worship him also." King Herod's courtiers stifled a laugh in their sleeve. The old Liar in Chief would get the irony, find out for himself and kill all the newborn males in Bethlehem under the age of two. He'd win, he'd survive, but miss the entire idea. Jesus wasn't after his throne but his heart. Maybe that was just as threatening.

Jesus said himself that his kingdom "is not of this world." The invasion of God on earth by the birth of his beloved Son Yeshua was to put right a wrong perpetrated long before. King Herod was only one in a long line of leaders, but not just leaders, humans everywhere and even now, who have a different idea, a mistaken idea, a deadly idea. That idea? I am king. I am the king of me. Given the right conditions I will storm the capitol and get my way, thinking I've found freedom, only to find disappointment. I wonder, if the woman who was shot and killed on Capitol Hill the other night, if she woke up that morning and thought this would be the day that she would die for Donald Trump?

The magi get it. There has been suffering on the long days and cold nights of travel, the uncertainty of their destination. There is humility and socially awkward offense in asking directions of King Herod, the seat of earthly power and vengeance and danger in asking. There is sacrifice in time, distance, pride and pocketbook. But they get it. Jesus is God's Son, the maker of the very star they followed (Jupiter and Saturn aligned). This is the embodiment of peace. This is the Peace to calm the storm within. Peace to live by. I wonder what sacrifice we have made for our faith. I wonder what peace we long for, what idea we are dying for now.

So the magi are open to the dream of being guided, this time not by the writing of prophets reluctantly shared by the chief wise men of King Herod's court, but guided this time by the Spirit of God who speaks to the Magi. "Go home by another route." And they listened. They got the idea. This baby would be protected. Twelve legions of angels would guard him til he accomplishes his mission. This God could not be killed. Unless he chooses. But that is a story for another day.

Hostility and worship, two reactions to the birth of an idea. The Logos, the word made flesh. The holy among us humans. Putting right the mistaken idea that keeps cropping up. So, how do we defend our faith in a sometimes-hostile world? Three steps to get us started

Step One: Set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts. That's Peter's command for the whole church. No one is excluded. Peter the fisherman, and spokesman for Christ, commands in his first letter, "set apart Christ as Lord; always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you, but do it with gentleness and respect." 1 Peter 3:15

What do the magi do when they step into the house? At long last, they see Jesus and his mother Mary, they are overcome with joy, they worship the newborn king, they present their gifts as any worshipper who has yearned to come into the presence of the One whom they love, do. If Jesus being born in humility teaches us anything, it's that we need to humble ourselves. Set Christ apart as Lord, as the centre. God will give you a new life, a new look at yourself and at what your life can be like when you're no longer fighting God or storming the wrong steps. That's the idea.

Step Two: Set apart time and place to worship at home. It's been ten months: approach worship at home like you would anything else that is important in your life; get dressed, at least from the waist up. Brush your hair. Clean your teeth. I gather you don't need make-up for Church at home. Being mentally prepared for worship by dressing is good psychologically and opens us to the Spirit, in a relaxed alert manner. I believe God honours our intentionality in worship. Sing the song. Read the scripture. Pray the prayers. Comment. Enjoy our time online worshipping together.

The action of the mob in Washington last Wed was shocking and maybe you might feel shocked or ill-equipped when someone asks you about God or church - how can you forgive so and so, how can you pray? how can you go to church? All rather intimidating questions. You don't need to know all the answers. Be ready to listen and better understand their feelings, affirm their desire to know, maybe you wonder yourself, then reply with a question, something like, what is it about this, that moves you to ask? So **Step Three:** Reply to their question with a question. Our theme in Epiphany is apologetics for the 21st C, not apologies, but from the Greek word 'apologia,' meaning giving a reason for the hope that is in you. One of the ways to open up conversation is to reply to their statement or question with a question. Who knows? Maybe ridicule and hostility will be defused and you'll hear what's behind their statement, as you listen. To begin to give an answer to anyone who asks, to defend the faith we cherish, means to cherish the founder of our faith, to be prepared to engage with someone's question by replying with a question of your own to better understand where they're coming from. **To set apart Christ as Lord in worship, might mean getting dressed for Church online! Shine, Jesus, shine!**