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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## ‘The Orneriness of Kings’

By Ron Allen

The 2016 Presidential Election is over. Some aspects of it have surprised many, and there is analysis to suggest that this is because more people than ever feel alienated or ignored by their leaders in government. Politicians have been regarded with cynicism before this. Charlie Chaplin remarked, “*I remain one thing and one thing only: a clown. That places me on a plain far higher than any politician.*” John F. Kennedy said, “*Mothers all want their sons to become president. But they don’t want them to become politicians in the process.*” Politics has to do with government. It has to do with public policy and the social order. It has to do with power; the way power is acquired, exercised, and maintained. Western democracies have three branches of government: The legislature (lawmakers), the executive (administration), the judiciary (judges and the courts).

In ancient times, these three levels of government coalesced in the king. The king was lawmaker, chief executive, law-enforcer and judge. If there are any who are less than content with the political process now, spare a thought for folk whose lives were regulated by the whims, fancies and brain-snaps of just one person—the king.

When Jesus was crucified, a sign was fastened to his cross. It read; Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews. Everyone knew the political significance of that sign. Many times Jesus spoke about the ‘kingdom (reign) of God’; of society arranged under the sovereignty of God and structured according to God’s values. The rulers of his day heard his words and recognized a threat to their political power.

Who were the politicians in the time of Jesus? From the time of the Maccabean wars, Jews had suffered greatly to achieve their independence. The Maccabees had founded a royal family, the Hasmoneans, who acted as both kings and high priests. Yet, despite the success of the Maccabean wars, the Hasmonean dynasty led by Hyrcanus II, and his chief minister Antipater, was under Roman control by 60 BC.

Hyrcanus’ brother, Aristobulus had political ambitions. He

managed to topple Hyrcanus and make himself king of Israel as Aristobulus II. He was set aside and Jews were put under direct Roman rule.

Hyrcanus, however, with Antipater, his chief minister tried to have himself re-instated, and Aristobulus’ son, Antigonus also tried to ingratiate himself with Julius Caesar by telling lies about Hyrcanus and Antipater.

Antipater had two sons: Pharsael and Herod. They also made a pitch to Caesar, telling him that Antigonus was Rome’s enemy, just like his father, Aristobulus. The result of these maneuvers was that Julius Caesar backed Hyrcanus and Antipater. He made Hyrcanus Ethnarch and High Priest, and Antipater Commissioner for all Judea. Then Antipater nominated his sons Pharsael and Herod as governors of Jerusalem and Galilee.

Herod immediately began to shore up his favor with Rome by attacking Jewish nationalists in Galilee. This earned him some credit. When the Sanhedrin learned what Herod was doing against their compatriots in the north, he was summoned to appear before them. He did so arrogantly knowing he had Rome’s backing. Hyrcanus the high priest had to draw on his political smarts to make sure the Sanhedrin did not act against Herod and thus anger Rome.

When Julius Caesar was assassinated, there was a time of instability in Jerusalem. Antigonus made a play for power. He mutilated the ear of Hyrcanus, so making him ineligible to hold the high priestly office. Antipater was poisoned. Pharsael was captured, and in order to avoid torture, he dashed his head on a rock until he died.

Herod escaped and made his way to Masada. Leaving his family there, he travelled onward to Egypt from whence he sailed to Rome. There he won the endorsement of Antony and Octavius, and the Senate ratified Herod as King of the Jews. Herod made his way back to Judea. On his way, he garnered support from Samaritans and Galileans, and fought his way in to Jerusalem. Thousands died. Antigonus was captured and

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# Everybody's Jesus

Note his unique appeal to the world. All other great teachers require the student to understand their setting and thus get their point of view, but he (Jesus) fits into every setting. He is everybody's Christ.

I have had the privilege of preaching about Jesus to some who had previously never heard him preached. I shall never forget the impression I got of them from talking about someone who was *recognized*. As an Indian once said to a missionary, "I have known him all my life and now you have told me his name."

Now this is a most remarkable thing. We say of an Irishman, "Oh, well, he's Irish," as if that absolves us from the laborious attempt to understand him. Jesus was a Jew. Yet that is the last thing anyone ever thinks of concerning him. He has been preached North, South, East and West and never has any son of man felt because Jesus was a Jew he could not understand him or be understood by him.

There is something unique here that transcends race and time. What missionary starts teaching Jesus by giving a background picture of Palestine in the first century? Yet of whom else can we teach without this? The missionary starts with a Jesus who is knowable as any member of the same race and period as his audience and he finds no difficulty. African Bushmen, and Indian outcastes who have never heard of Josephus, know him as their daily

companion. He is no foreigner to them.

It was so in the days of his flesh. A Jew talking to a Samaritan. What a scandal! A Jewish *man* talking to a Samaritan *woman*. What an outrage! A Jewish Rabbi talking to a Samaritan prostitute. Incredible! But the disciples find a Samaritan woman of no reputation in the most intimate conversation with Jesus.

Leslie Weatherhead: HIS LIFE AND OURS, pp. 33, 34. 



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taken before Antony where he was killed with an axe.

Herod's ascendancy was soaked in blood. He was hated by his subjects from the outset. He was declared king of the Jews in 40 BC and he reigned until his death in 4 BC.

Knowing full well how his bread was buttered, Herod cultivated his relations with Rome as a first priority, but he also understood that the racist loyalties of his subjects was something that he had to be mindful of. He was himself only half-Jewish and his first wife, Doris was not Jewish. So, he chose for his second wife a woman from the Hasmonean royal line. Her name was Mariamne and the people loved her.

Mariamne produced two sons for Herod: Alexander and Aristobulus. Both were sent to Rome to be educated for a career in politics. It came about that on an occasion when Herod had gone to Laodicea to meet with Antony to clear his name of charges made against him by Cleopatra, he left

instructions to his staff that, if he should die, Mariamne was to be executed. He didn't want anyone else to have her.

More intrigues followed. Herod's first wife, Doris, spread rumors that Mariamne and her sons Alexander and Aristobulus, were being disloyal to their father. The two sons were completely innocent, but Herod was deeply suspicious. A trial ensued in Rome under the supervision of Augustus. The two were acquitted. Herod, however, nurtured deep insecurities. In order to make sure, he had his boys killed. Before he was through, he also killed Mariamne. These assassinations were politically expedient, and they brought to an end all hope in Israel of a continuation of the Hasmonean line.

After killing Mariamne, Herod tried to win some acceptance with Jews by rebuilding the temple. He sought to make it a grand and imposing structure like the pagan temples. The priesthood, dominated by the Sadducees, was impressed →

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with Herod's vision. The idea of a religious and political center for the nation, which would generate lots of money appealed to them. Work on the temple began in 19 BC. Within ten years, the superstructure was complete, but work continued through the time of Jesus up until 64 AD.

The temple turned out to be politically fraught for Herod. The Jews owed him for building it, but it came to be a center of their political power. For them it represented the rule of God, not that of Herod or of Rome. So, the temple came to represent both Herodian and Jewish politics.

As he came into his last years, Herod, having managed to see off many rivals and enemies, having pre-empted any challenge to his rule coming from his own family members (before he was through, he had also killed his son Antipater and his first wife Doris), suffering as he was from something approximating bowel cancer, determined at all costs to be King of the Jews, he was visited by some travelers from the East. They put this question to him: "*Where is the one born king of the Jews?*" (Matthew 2:2). Matthew tells us that Herod was disturbed—and all Jerusalem with him. We can see why. What would this madman do next, having heard of the birth of one born King of the Jews?

The genealogies of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke designate Jesus as David's royal son. This conveys more than a spiritual title. Mary is told by the angel: "*The Lord will give your son the **throne** of his father David, and he will **reign** over the house of David forever*" (Luke 1:32, 33).

After his baptism, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. "*The time is come, the **kingdom of God** is near*" (Mark 1:14). He was announcing a new civil order, a new regime. He was announcing the government of God. His words were political dynamite.



Jesus proved unlike the politicians of his day, and he wouldn't rate as a politician now. But that does not mean he had no interest in politics. The Good news of God, which he proclaimed, was not just an answer to people's private frets and fears. He was announcing a new polity. He was instituting a new conception of power, a new idea of community, a radical conception of law and administration of justice.

Mary prophesied the social and political repercussions of her son's mission.

*"He has brought down **rulers** from their **thrones**, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty"* (Luke 1:51-53).

Ideas like these would have sent shivers down the spine of men like Herod.

The Gospels present Jesus as King. But his kingship is laid down—not among the political class—but among their underlings; among the unfortunates who must endure what Mark Twain described as 'The Orneriness of Kings.' Jesus founded his kingdom among those who struggle in their daily lives against the massive egos and shenanigans of the rulers of this world. Born in obscurity in the back of an inn, domestic animals were among the first to know of his arrival.

The reign of God appears not to need the usual trappings of power and eminence. No press corps, no cavalry, no chariots and horsemen, no publicity machine, no private jet!

Mark's Gospel makes use of Isaiah 40 to identify John the Baptist as the one to go before the Lord to prepare his way. The Lord himself is described in that chapter thus wise: "*See, the sovereign Lord comes with power and his arm **rules** for him... He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young*" (Isaiah 40:10,11).



What an idyllic picture! A shepherd leading his flock patiently, and watchfully across a pasture. One of the lambs—disabled or weary—he bears on his arm. Some ewes have just given birth; their lambs can barely walk. The shepherd moves carefully; gently leading the mothers with young. Here for us to ponder, is a representation of the human condition with God presiding!

From the day Jesus was born, there are signs that the government of God has no parallel in world kingdoms. This king is borne away in the night by his parents, Mary and Joseph. They manage to secrete him in Egypt, two hundred miles away. He disappears for a time within the large Jewish population there. He is small, weak, vulnerable; a refugee. Meanwhile, Herod is powerful, menacing, controlling, vindictive, calculating, ruthless and violent.

The politics of God owe nothing to world politics. Nothing in our political processes is illustrative of the reign of God. We must look to the imagery of an ancient eastern shepherd to find a metaphor for God's rule. He does not force or harass his flock. He leads. He does not coerce, he coaxes. Instead of holding himself impersonally and mechanically remote from the flock, he is close to them. He loves them. They are close to his heart. He is compassionate. Under his rule, no individual, however weak or disposable, is left behind.

Jesus brings different priorities into human life, the seeds of a new society founded on the values of God. How much we need him.



# Merry “Pagan” Christmas

By Jeffrey Hagan

Well, I haven't been disappointed. This year is the same as every other year. It has become the norm for some Christians to express their belief that Christmas trees (decorated in all their splendor with ornaments and lights) is idolatry. They generally like to use a passage from Jeremiah to support their disapproval.

*“Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them. For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it will not totter” (Jeremiah 10:24).*

Viewing the passage within the historical and biblical context of where it has been placed takes away any possibility for this text to be interpreted in this way. The verse directly following this passage prevents this possibility: *“Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk” (Jeremiah 10:5).*

The description Jeremiah gives of a tree cut down from the forest being decorated with silver and gold and stabilized with proper tools so it would not sway and fall over, clearly shows a reference to wooden idols, not Christmas trees.

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As a matter of fact, Christmas trees began in Germany two thousand years after Jeremiah condemned idols made by the hands of men. Over time, Christmas trees developed from two early Christian traditions. One was called a ‘paradise tree,’ which was decorated with apples in order to remind us of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. The other was a shelf built in the shape of a triangle which held Christmas figurines decorated with a star. At some point in the sixteenth century, these two symbols were brought together and developed into the present Christmas tree tradition we know and use today.


With this being the case, the truth is that the Christmas tree started out as a unique Christian symbol and can still be used by Christians today as part of their Christmas celebration. However, Christmas trees



are not necessary for Christmas.

Of course, Christmas holiday celebrations can be carried out without a tree decorated with ornaments. Like all symbolic items that assist us in our worship, and cause us to ponder on and celebrate Christ, like the bread and wine/juice of communion, water baptism, crosses, art work, etc., we must never allow Christmas trees to be a substitute for where it is they point. Specifically, it's God's eternal redeeming plan from the fall in Paradise to salvation in Christ by Christ through faith.

Hopefully, instead of painting Christianity as cultic and odd by dogmatically opposing the Christmas tree, one will take the opportunity this year to be reminded of Christ by the Christmas tree. Why not use this open door opportunity to explain the symbolism of the Christmas tree to a neighbor or friend who is not a believer. Perhaps this can lead into a conversation that discusses and explains the reason we celebrate during this season. The Christmas tree is not, nor was it ever intended to be, a substitute for the Savior. Instead, it is a symbol that points to the Savior.

-Rev. Jeff Hagan, ThD CEEd. Founder and President of True Grace Ministries and Theological Institute. 

Christ that was born on Christmas day,  
Laid on the world his two small hands,  
Lifting it worlds and worlds away  
Up to the level of love's demands.

And those hands hold though  
pierced with nails,  
They hold on still in power and pain,  
And they shall hold till Satan fails  
And love comes to his own to reign.

-Studdert Kennedy

