

Matthew 2:1-12

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[0 : 00] Now this morning, I find myself taking a great risk. I want to speak to you about the political significance of Christmas. This has been years here where the vast majority of us feel that we've had more than enough politics.

We have Brexit, Brexit, Brexit coming out of our years. Bad deal or no deal. Votes of no confidence. Lip reading of politicians in Parliament. You look at Europe and there's all sorts of ruptures. Riots in France. And that's to say nothing of how you may be feeling if you happen to follow United States politics, if that's what you call it. Shutdowns and resignations.

And just when you thought, well, you could leave politics behind for at least a week or two, all the Christmas preparations are nearly done. You come out of church on a Sunday morning.

You hope that you'll get to sing some carols. Where safer than church if you want to avoid politics and conflict intentions. And the preacher comes up to the microphone and he announces that he's going to speak politically.

[1 : 14] The political significance of Christmas. Let's call this sermon the politics of Christmas. And I do sympathise with you and you all to understand my reaction to the topic.

Just doesn't seem to be right, does it? What goes with Christmas? Well, anything but politics. What goes with Christmas? Turkey goes with Christmas. Family and friends go with Christmas.

Giving and receiving go with Christmas. Good food goes with Christmas. By Tuesday afternoon we live with far too much of it. Children go with Christmas. The wonderful make-believe of Christmas. The trees and the lights and the Santas.

Memories go with Christmas. Some of them difficult. And the story of Jesus. Baby Jesus. Well, that goes with Christmas. Angels. Wise men. Shepherds. They go with Christmas. But politics in Christmas? Community break.

Christmas and economics go together, don't they? And we're told we'll spend around 80 billion this Christmas. In fact, they estimate that this year will be the first year that one billion is spent online on Christmas Day.

[2 : 30] And so I understand it if you did not expect on the Sunday before Christmas at church that you didn't want to talk on economics. I mean, you certainly wouldn't want to spend on politics.

So I recognise it's a big risk I'm taking. But if you stay around and you've got storm out in disgust over the next few minutes, I hope you'll see that Christmas is highly political.

Indeed, I want to persuade you that unless you understand the political significance of Christmas, you don't understand Christmas at all. Christmas is essentially political.

And our celebration on Tuesday will be a political celebration. If it's not, I don't know what you're celebrating. But I can tell you this, it's not Christmas.

I celebrate whatever you like. But if you celebrate Christmas, it is a political celebration. So perhaps the best place to begin, and to go firstly, is to go to the first Christmas.

[3 : 29] To think back to there. And of course, I'm talking about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem about 2018 years ago. And that was a political event. It was a political event that was so powerful that it rocked the most powerful political figure in the region at the time.

And we often overlook this in the Christmas story when it's told. And I understand why, because it's so ugly. But if you'd been there, you would not possibly have been able to overlook it.

King Herod, when he heard the birth of Jesus, he took to me the most extraordinary and drastic steps. Which in fact resulted in a terrible slaughter.

King Herod very clearly saw that the birth of Jesus, when he heard about it, was a threat to his political power. If the Bethlehem Telegraph, or the Bethlehem Morning Herald, reported the slaughter of all the boys under the age of two in the town of Bethlehem.

That would have been unlikely. King Herod was not the kind of ruler that would have allowed the freedom of the press. But if it had reported, it wouldn't have been tucked away on page 77 of the Times.

[4 : 43] Under a heading of religious affairs. It would have been front page news. It would have been political dynamite. And it's amazing that this is overlooked.

How the story of Christmas has been domesticated and tamed and made lovely and cute. It's puzzling. I grab that, and we'll come back to that in a moment.

But it is clear that the most powerful political figure in that place at that time regarded the first Christmas as politically dangerous. To himself.

And he was right. How come? Well, because King Herod got the idea that the birth of this child is dangerous from the Old Testament Scriptures.

This Bible. It is what now we call the Old Testament from the first two thirds of the Bible. Because, you see, in those pages, over the centuries that had gone before, the prophets, the people who spoke on behalf of God, had created and developed the expectations of the birth of Jesus.

[5 : 52] That would be eventually fulfilled. And what King Herod understood, and he understood it far better than most people today, is that those expectations were political expectations.

If the child born in Bethlehem really was the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectation, then Herod, King Herod, was smart enough to work out that this child being born was political dialogue. And so I want to take you back, therefore, even further than the first Christmas. I want to show you what the prophets said thousands of years before Jesus was born.

What it was they said that Herod knew about and scared him. Well, we'll go back to seven, eight hundred years before Jesus. So let's go back to Isaiah chapter nine.

It's on page five, seven, three. Page five, seven, three. It's on Isaiah chapter nine. And Isaiah is looking forward.

[6 : 53] He's looking forward to about seven hundred and fifty years. He's looking forward to what will happen. And these are his words. He looks down the years under God's inspiration.

And he says in verse two of Isaiah chapter nine. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

And those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light is shown. If you go down to verse six, it says, for to us a child is born.

To us a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. Now just listen to the radical statement. The radical politics of that statement.

[8 : 01] Of prophet Isaiah, seven, eight hundred years before Jesus is born. And so first, in verse two, he says, he refers to the people as walking in darkness.

And living in the land of deep darkness. What kind of comment is that on the political regime of the day? Are political slogans?

There are certain ones that are famous out there. In the 1979 election, the conservatives had a slogan which said, Labour isn't working with a queue of people in a long line.

Some of you are old enough to remember that. In 1997, Labour had a very famous slogan. And it was this, things can only get better. And it was accompanied by that wonderful D Ream song that you might remember.

Things can only get better. Labour isn't working. Labour isn't working. What is that saying about the state of affairs? Things can only get better.

[9 : 03] It's a great insult, isn't it, to the preceding government. Labour isn't working. Well, Isaiah is doing exactly the same sort of thing. He says, in verse two of Isaiah nine, People are walking in darkness.

Seven hundred and fifty years later, King Herod would hear those words, And he would hear them as a description of his regime and of his government. The people are living in the land of deep darkness, or the shadow of death.

And so the politics of Christmas starts right here. The nations as they are, people are walking in darkness. And that analysis is very, very profound.

It is an assessment, isn't it, of profound ignorance of human society. As it is. It's an analysis of the deep, deep moral failures that fracture human communities.

It's a comment on the utter impotence and the utter incompetence of political leaders to put things right. It's not so much a criticism of politicians, but a recognition of the plight of human society. [10:11] And the plight of human beings, well it's beyond that. The people are walking in darkness. The people are living in a land of deep darkness.

And then if you listen to this prophet from so long ago, from hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. The second thing he says as he looks down these centuries is in verse 6. Can you see what he says? For to us a child is born. And that statement is, has a ring of wonderful and lovely, but it's not exactly world shattering is it? As the Christmas story usually does for us today. It does for you, it says, a baby, a child in a manger. Well everybody knows that the birth of a child is a momentous event for a family. But the birth of a child for a family is not exactly history making. But for Isaiah, as he looks down the centuries, so to speak, this event looms large.

[11:11] For to us a son, a child is born. And it is of course the birth of Jesus to which he was referring. And then it says, verse 6, to us a son is given, thirdly.

And with that slight change of wording, it raises some questions. Whose son are you talking about? What do you mean given? Who has given this son to us?

And with those thoughts in the end, Isaiah fourthly goes on to say, and the government will be on his shoulders. This child will be a ruler. And now you're clearly into politics, aren't you? Because the ruler in Isaiah's day, the king in Isaiah's day was hopeless. The government of Isaiah's day was a fuss. And Isaiah had said so in his writings again and again and again. And so Isaiah had a message for inadequate politicians. And a message for inadequate rulers. And he says to them, for a child is to be born, who's going to take over the government.

[12:22] And this will change things. It didn't actually happen in Isaiah's day. It didn't happen in the next generation. It didn't happen for centuries. But Herod woke up one day and realised that it was happening in his day.

The child was born. And so do you begin to see why Herod was afraid? And then fifthly, Isaiah says this child is going to be given four titles.

His name will be called, first of all, Wonderful Counselor. The rulers of Isaiah's day, they were fools. They said foolish things. They did foolish things.

And 750 years later, Herod was like that too. And 2018 years later has much changed.

But Isaiah says this ruler will be wonderful in the wisdom of his counsel. The second title he's given in verse 6 is that he will be mighty God.

[13:23] The ruler of Isaiah's day, the politicians of Isaiah's day, they were weak. They couldn't heal the wounds of human society. They couldn't heal the wounds of human lives.

And neither can Herod 750 years later. And neither can our leaders today. But Isaiah says this ruler, he will be able to. He will be mighty.

He will, said Isaiah in a way that Isaiah did not explain. He will be God. And the third title is that he will be everlasting father.

Or father forever. The rulers of Isaiah's day, they were greedy, power hungry, self interested men. Whose main concern was to stay in power forever.

Or for at least as long as possible. Does that sound familiar? And of course, so was Herod. But their reigns, like every other politician's reign, is limited.

[14:26] They could do so little. But Isaiah says to you, this child, this son who has been given to you. Whose government will be on his shoulders.

He will be a father to his people. And he will reign forever. And of the increase of his government, there will be no end.

The fourth title is, I'm Prince of Peace. And that will be the outcome of his rule. Peace. Or conflict gone. Or turmoil ceased.

Peace. Peace. And those were the expectations that were generated by the prophets. Like Isaiah, through the centuries before Jesus was born. And when a thoroughly inadequate ruler like Herod, he heard of those expectations.

That actually came about in his day. That the child would be born. Do you understand why he was disturbed? Why he was uneasy? And why he was frightened? Because the birth of this child was an event of unparalleled political significance.

[15 : 43] And it confronted him. And the strange thing is, that what we do as we celebrate Christmas, year after year after year, if it is Christmas that we celebrate, then what we are doing is saying that Herod was right.

Of course, he was not right in his reaction. But he was right. He did understand that when Jesus was born, the words of the prophet and the expectations of the prophets were fulfilled. The child of whom they spoke was born. The son who was promised has been given. Herod was right.

He has in fact become a mighty ruler. Wider than any Herod. More powerful than any king. Outlasting any president. More effective than any prime minister.

He has done what no politician was able to do. Has ever been able to do. He has brought a great life. To the people who walk in darkness. He has paid the penalty for his people's sins.

[16 : 55] By his death on the cross. He has secured forgiveness and peace. For all who come under his rule. And he then overcame death. I can't explore all those things with you this morning.

But I can invite you. To make sure that you truly celebrate Christmas this year. You know what the word means? The word means the feast of the king.

In one sense I don't mind what you celebrate on Tuesday. There's loads of good things to celebrate aren't there? Family, celebrate the fun, celebrate the turkey.

Turkey, I don't care what you celebrate. But I do invite you. Whatever else you're celebrating this year. To celebrate Christmas. Celebrate the feast of the king. And you can't do that can you?

Unless you've ceased hostility to the king. You can't be the king's enemy. And celebrate the king's feast. You can only celebrate Christmas.

[18 : 00] If you've ceased hostility to the one we rightly call king. The one we rightly call wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace. The politics of Christmas is this.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. And so the message of Christmas is very simple as this. It is receive him. In his bow before him.

And live with him as your king. And so I want to invite you to address this king with me now. We're going to pray. Let's pray together.