

Matthew 2:1-11

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[0 : 00] Well if you've come in since the beginning let me say again thank you so much for coming and joining us. It's a real thrill to see you all here and to join with you together. I just want to talk to you for a few moments from that passage that we just have read to us from Matthew chapter 2 so you might find it helpful to keep that open in front of you.

Does the festive season enchant you or enrage you? Christmas it brings out the best of us doesn't it and also the worst in us.

The founder of a new pop-up shop in London has decided to cash in on this in a unique way with a different way to relieve the tension and stress of Christmas.

The advertisement reads, feeling stressed about Christmas shopping, already fed up with Christmas music, let out your Christmas angst, and I'm not making this up, in Rudolph's rage room. How does it work? We invite you to take part in our Christmas rage room by donning red jumpsuits, hard hats, arming yourselves with a baseball bat, and letting your rage out on Christmas paraphernalia.

[1 : 22] Christmas trees, Christmas trees, baubles, dancing santas, whatever you like, all to the Christmas soundtrack of your choice. It's £18 for four minutes by the way if you're interested.

While it's full of joy and cheer and light, there is a dark side to Christmas, isn't there? We wonder why Matthew, if he's trying to commend Jesus to us in his account of the birth of Jesus, why does he tell us about the dark side of Christmas?

He includes details here, doesn't he, about the ultimate Scrooge, the ultimate hater of Christmas, the enraged King Herod.

He is very, very stressed out, isn't he, that first Christmas, but in a much more serious way than perhaps we are. Well, he tells us about him because this is history, first of all.

There was really a king called Herod, who lived at the time when Jesus was born. Matthew places this in history, it's not a myth that we're hearing about this afternoon, but more than that, to show us that, joking aside, when the light of Christmas appears, there is a dark side.

[2 : 45] There is a dark side in Herod, and there is a dark side in all of us. Matthew talks us through Herod's response to this baby, to warn us about our response.

So I've got three headings for you, just in a short time now, three R words to show you Herod's response. First of all, Herod meets his new rival.

Herod meets his new rival. Just imagine the scene in Jerusalem. It's the royal city, isn't it? It's the centre of Herod's royal power.

However, history tells us that Herod has worked his way to the top. He's got a few skeletons in his closet, probably literally, because he's bumped off a few of his family members to keep his grip on power as king.

And he is the king you don't mess with. There are no contenders to my throne, he says. I'm the king and I'm the ruler. But what's the first thing that Herod hears at Christmas?

[3 : 56] Some wise men turn up in Jerusalem, don't they? And they ask this question in verse 2 there. Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

What a question to ask. Yeah, we know there is Herod. But where is the king? Where is the new king who's been born? The first thing Herod hears that first Christmas?

I've got a rival. There is a new king. The light appears, doesn't it? But in Herod we see a dark side. Herod is bothered by the light. Herod is bothered by this new rival. We're told in verse 3 down there, he is troubled. It's a loaded word.

He's agitated. He's stressed out. He's stirred up. The veins in his neck kind of bulge. And his face goes red. And he gets cold sweats. Apparently in the ancient world, with the appearance of a new

star, it symbolised the death of an old king and the birth of a new one.

[5 : 09] When Jesus appears, it's as if Herod is reading his own obituary. It's as if Herod sees his power slipping away.

The stress of Christmas for Herod is a realisation that as Jesus is born, he has a rival. He is losing the right to be in charge.

He's faced with the uncomfortable question, where is the real king? But this is the dark side in him, isn't it? He doesn't want there to be a rival.

He doesn't want to be ruled. He wants to rule. We read the story, don't we? And we kind of boo and hiss at Herod. He's kind of ultimate pantomime character, isn't he?

The ultimate villain. But there is a sense that we need to learn from Herod's response. That actually we need to think more like Herod.

[6 : 09] Because Herod realises the truth of Christmas. He realises that because Jesus has come, he has lost the right to rule his own life.

He no longer has the right to be in charge. And if we understand Christmas, if we understand who Jesus is, there is a sense that Jesus should trouble us too.

He comes to rule. To rule this world. To rule me and to rule you. And once the light of Jesus has dawned on you, a new king comes to rule.

And we don't like that, do we? We don't like rivals. And like Herod, there is a dark side in us at Christmas. Herod has a new rival.

Second thing though, Herod deals with his rival with a ruse. Herod's ruse. Herod has two choices with Jesus, doesn't he?

[7 : 14] He can either attack Jesus' rule or he can surrender to his rule. Attack or surrender. And we know in the story which one he goes for, don't we?

But he thinks he can do it in a clever way. Did you notice in the story, Herod's way of dealing with Jesus is to lie and mislead with a ruse.

We're told in verse 8, he gets the wise men in private and he says, go and search diligently for the child and when you've found him, bring me word so that I can go and worship him too.

And we're thinking, nice try, Herod. We know that's not his real intention, don't we? He wears a mask. He acts as if he is one thing when he's another.

He says, let's pretend with Jesus. His way of defending himself against the perceived threat of Jesus' rule is to twist the truth.

[8 : 21] He pretends he's out to worship Jesus when actually he wants to destroy Jesus. And the ruse is his coping mechanism to divert the reality of the situation.

to turn the truth into a lie, to pretend. We know the truth under Herod's mask, don't we? Under his mask, there is a man who is deeply insecure, who is troubled by Jesus.

And the only way to cope with Jesus is to bend the truth for him. It's what we do, isn't it? Attack or surrender?

And we think that we can pretend things are false when they're just not. We play, let's pretend with Jesus. We pretend not to believe when deep down we know these things are true.

We live in God's world, we're surrounded by his creation, we depend on him for life, we are creatures. We pretend we can bluff King Jesus.

[9 : 32] We might even pretend that we worship him when actually we want to get rid of him. We mask the truth. Now, when we look at Herod, he's a total megalomaniac, isn't he?

I mean, he's way off the scale. We see in him a very tragic, sad man. Do you notice when he was troubled, Matthew gives us that little detail in verse 3, doesn't he?

When he was troubled, all Jerusalem was troubled with him. He's a king who has used other people, used his own people, to kind of bolster his own choices.

And they've become conditioned into being on tender huts every time he's unhappy, haven't they? He needs them to be their yes, his yes men.

So his rude with Jesus feeds off being surrounded with people whose reaction corresponds with how he feels. They were troubled as well.

[10 : 33] As he attacks Jesus, everyone else around him has to fall in line. In our insecurities, when Jesus comes and claims rule in our lives, as we play, let's pretend with him, it is much easier to do that, isn't it, when everyone else is doing it too.

We're troubled by Jesus, and we say, I'm going to get rid of him, but that's okay, because everyone's doing it. We corporately feed each other's deception.

Herod's met his rival, he tries a ruse, but he can't hide, can he? Because we see in the end, Herod's rage. We see Herod's rage, that's the third R.

The light of Jesus comes into Herod's life, but it doesn't bring him a warm feeling, does it? It doesn't make him feel nice and sentimental. Instead of playing Bing Crosby on his CD player, he plays Rage Against the Machine, doesn't he?

Once the ruse fails, we see what's under the mask. Jesus brings him out in a rage. And at the end of Herod's story, we get this really grisly, last-ditch attempt to attack Jesus, don't we?

[11 : 59] It's there in verse 16, and it's kind of the verse that we kind of go, ugh, when we read it, isn't it? When Herod realised that he'd been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.

From our knowledge of history and village sizes around that time, Herod executed about 12 to 13 little toddlers that night. The mask slips.

We see his rage at this new king, an unhinged, desperate, tragic rage. The atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel speaks candidly and honestly about his feelings.

He admits that at the heart of his atheism is not that he thinks Jesus' rule is irrational or undeserved, but simply that he doesn't want it.

He says, I'm speaking from experience, being strongly subject to this feeling. It isn't just that I don't believe in God, it's that I hope there is no God.

[13 : 18] I don't want there to be a God, he says. And my guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not rare. It's really honest, isn't it?

And he's hit the nail on the head for Herod. In his rage, he just doesn't want Jesus to rule him. Herod the king commits treason against the real king.

It's attack or surrender. And the incarnation, what we think about every Christmas, proves to us that actually we're not so unlike Herod after all.

Because when God comes into the world, when the light of Jesus shines, how do we respond? We don't relish his rule in our lives. We rage at him.

Our cosmic authority problem, as Nagel puts it, becomes manifestly obvious to all when we try and snuff out the light, nail him to a cross and kill him.

[14 : 25] The mask slips and our rage against him comes out. You've got to feel a bit of pity for Herod, haven't you? Attack or surrender?

And he makes the wrong choice. And his story ends here. As Jesus' parents take him to safety, we see in verse 15 he's in safety until Herod dies.

It's there in the Gospels. As if it could have been any other way. Where is the real king here? I would have thought the answer to that question is obvious, isn't it?

And Herod couldn't fool him or rage against him and neither can you. King of the Jews was the title that almost got Jesus killed when he was a baby.

But it was impossible to defeat him. His rule couldn't be stopped. But Jesus would embody that title once more.

[15 : 31] Not at his birth but at his death. If you read Matthew's Gospel he tells us later that that title comes back and it's written above his head as he dies on a cross.

He's nailed and killed there. Reading King of the Jews. In the end that title does cost Jesus his life and he is defeated.

Our rage finally snaps out the light. But in an ironic twist his weak death was actually his greatest moment of power.

His greatest act of kindness towards us as king. For in his death he voluntarily receives what is deserved by his enemies.

By those who rage against him. He lovingly absorbs what is due to us in our rage. In Jesus in a mysterious way God himself receives the penalty for treason in God's own kingdom.

[16 : 48] The death penalty is given and the sword falls in judgment on him and Jesus receives what we deserve in our stead.

Like Herod you can't remove Jesus' rule. You just can't do that. but with a king as good and as kind as that who would want to?

He is a king who loves his people with an incredible love. Taking on their own rebellion onto himself. He is a king who is literally dying to love his people.

Such a contrast isn't it to see how the wise men respond to the star. They go in and worship Jesus and it's a little picture of how things go. Attack or surrender.

Herod will continue in paranoia and insecurity and anxiety and stress. Vainly holding on to his power. Going to the grave in desperation. And the wise men enjoy Jesus' presence.

[17 : 55] They surrender to him and worship. Just as we close, let me say, I'm not a mind reader this afternoon, I'm not going to do any tricks or anything, but as arrogant as it may sound, I know what's going to happen next.

I will shut up finally. And you will do one of two things this afternoon. You will leave this building and another year will roll around and you will either attack or surrender.

You will attack him or surrender to his rule. Because the dark side in Herod is the dark side of every Christmas.

Because it asks us the question, where is the real king? A king who rivals our right to be in charge of our own lives, but he is a king who dies and rises from the dead to rescue us from the very serious consequences of how we behaved in his kingdom.

Perhaps Matthew has prodded something in you as you come here to this carol service. But maybe you're a kind of sceptical person and you doubt some of what you've heard.

[19 : 11] Can I ask you to be consistent in your scepticism and doubt your doubts? Come and talk to us. Come and learn more about this great king.

We run a talk here every Tuesday, the Ealing Lunchtime Talk. There are some flyers at the back. Why not take home the Matthew's Gospel that was on your chairs and read that over Christmas and learn more about Jesus the King?

Let me plead with you not to make the same mistakes that Herod made. Don't think you can fight him or fool him or finish him off. It is attack or surrender.

So come out of the dark and surrender to the King who loves his people this much. Come and worship him, King Jesus. Amen.