

Matthew 2:1-12

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[0:00] Matthew 2, 1-12, the visit of the wise man. There's a lot of tradition isn't there about this episode?

! There's a lot of tradition which necessarily the Bible doesn't tell us. We don't know for sure that there were three Magi. I like to think there were about 300 of them. It's just an inference isn't it from the three gifts of gold, incense and myrrh from verse 11.

We don't know that they came on camels like it is on your Christmas card. They certainly didn't come to the manger. You might think they came to the manger but verse 11 tells you they came to the house.

And if the star first appeared to them at Jesus' birth it would seem that it took them a number of months to make the trip. And it's likely that it was a year to a year and a half after Jesus had been born.

So they arrive in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary are apparently still living in Bethlehem. And they go to the house. Not the manger. Probably a toddler by that time.

[1:14] And of course they don't have names. Casper, whatever the other two are called. That started in the 6th century. And it came into vogue then. And we're not sure that they were kings or not.

So there are some things that we know are not true just that they've come to us through tradition. But we have this passage in Matthew's Gospel.

And Matthew wouldn't have put it in his Gospel if it was important. And so why is this important? And I think Matthew would say something like this. It is most important. It's a most important visit because of four Ps.

First of all the place that's involved. You see that in verse 1. And in verse 2. And in verse 5. And in verse 6. Bethlehem, Bethlehem, Bethlehem, Bethlehem.

When the Magi come to choose them. They say where is the one who is born king of the Jews? Where? We don't usually pay attention to small towns, do we?

[2:19] Very much. I like Bethlehem. Think of small towns. You haven't thought of them this week, have you? Unless we need something from them.

Or we find someone from there. Probably most of us didn't think this week of Gretem. Or Denham. Or Merthyr Tidbert.

We don't think of those towns, do we? It doesn't consist. You don't pay attention to small little places. Unless there's someone or something that you need to find out.

And so Bethlehem. This little tiny place comes to be on the map. And so when Herod finds out the inquiry that's been made, he calls, doesn't he, the chief priests and the theologians.

And he says to those chief priests and theologians, he says to these scholars, where is the Messiah? Where is the one who is to be king of the Jews, to be born? And they say, oh, the scripture tells us, Micah 5 tells us, that it will be Bethlehem in Judea.

[3:18] And then they quote it to him. Bethlehem. That is the birthplace, or at least the hometown of David. 1 Samuel chapter 16. And David was the king who'd received that great covenant promise in 2 Samuel chapter 7.

That was, your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. God had said, your throne, David, will be established forever. There'll always be someone sitting on your throne from your family.

But in the time that Micah prophesied, it's about 700 years before Christ. He was prophesying when the kingship of David, when the line of David, those kings was going to be eclipsed.

And there wouldn't be a Davidic king on the throne. And it looked like God's promise was going to be eclipsed. But he prophesied. Micah says, from your hometown, David, there will come a new David.

A new Messiah. And he will arise from the very same place where David was from. And so Bethlehem was David's town. A little town of Bethlehem.

[4 : 27] And the theologians knew that. And they told Herod, it will be in Bethlehem, in Judea. Now why does Matthew bang on about this point? Why does he labour at it? That Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem.

A few years later, Matthew didn't write his gospel right at the time this took place. I think he wrote his gospel 20 to 30 years after the time of Jesus. Some people would want to put it later.

But I would say 20 to 30 years later. And there was a problem about where Jesus was born. John chapter 7 verses 41 and 42. Some Jews are debating about Jesus.

They'd seen some of his works. And some of them made the statement, look at what he's doing. He must be the Messiah. He must be the king of the Jews. And others said, you know nothing.

You don't know anything. The Messiah, does he come out of Galilee? No he doesn't. Jesus is from Nazareth in Galilee. The scripture says, he is from the seat of David.

[5 : 27] He is from the little village of Bethlehem. That's where the Messiah comes from. Don't you know anything? He can't be the Messiah. You don't get a Messiah from Galilee. You don't get a Messiah from Nazareth.

The Messiah will be from Bethlehem. And there were misconceptions. Some people knew that Jesus was from Nazareth. And they never searched any further. He is Jesus the Nazarene, isn't he?

And the logic went like this. A Messiah will come from Bethlehem. The king of the Jews will be born in Bethlehem. But Jesus is not from Bethlehem. He is from Nazareth.

He is from Galilee. Therefore Jesus cannot be the Messiah. But they were wrong. And so there is a reason why Matthew in the writing of his gospel wants to realise that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Just like Micah, the prophet, had said he would be born 700 years before. It's important to know that. And what Matthew is implying here, and it's saying to you and I, he's saying don't take a superficial view of Jesus.

[6 : 31] Especially in this matter of his birth. Don't say, oh he came from Nazareth. Search a little deeper. Check out the details. He was born in Bethlehem.

The place of David's birth. The place is important. Don't take a superficial view of Jesus. There are some people, they do that, don't they?

Some people have problems with the accounts about Jesus. The virgin birth. Or the miracles he did. Or his resurrection. And so lots of people have problems with Jesus.

And yet they've never looked at the evidence. They haven't even looked at the source documents. They've not taken one of the four gospels and read them through slowly and carefully.

And asked, what do the sources say? About this Jesus. Let me look at the data. Let me expose myself. And sometimes we as Christians, we can very easily take a superficial view.

[7 : 35] And when we do that, we are bound to get a wrong perception. That's why I think it's important, even though you may have no problem in believing what the New Testament says about Jesus, we can still have a very superficial knowledge of him.

That's why it's such a good exercise, isn't it, for Christians to take the four gospels paragraph by paragraph and read it through slowly. And as you walk your way through, at each point say, what is this telling me about the sort of Lord I have?

What is this teaching me about Jesus here? What does it encourage me to believe? What does it shock me? How does this disturb me?

Try to hear him. Don't let the familiarity with you throw you off. Ask yourself, what does he mean? How close is he striking?

Do I really believe that about Jesus? And so on. Don't take a superficial view about Jesus. That's why you mentioned the place. Now secondly, Matthew says to us, this visit is important to us because of the people involved.

[8 : 47] You see the people in verses 1 and 2? There's one set of them. There are wise men, magi, we used to call them. We don't know where they came from. They are from the east somewhere.

May have been from Babylon. May have been from Persia. May have been from Iran. Perhaps. All we know is that they are Gentiles. They are pagans. And they may well have been pagan astrologers.

And they are coming to worship the king. Whom they believe has been born. So on the one hand, you've got pagan Gentiles who've got no light at all.

Or very little from the Jewish scriptures. And then you've got another group in verses 4-6. You have the chief priests and the theologians.

The scribes of the people. And they are the ones that have the scriptures. They know the prophecy. And they are the ones that answer the question that Herod pops to them.

[9 : 52] And you see something of a contrast. And Matthew is deliberately contrasting. On the one hand, you have pagan Gentiles who have very little knowledge of God's truth.

And yet they are here to worship God's king. And on the other hand, you have God's professing people. The clergy. The Bible students.

The people that know the answers. And what does the scripture say? They don't go to worship him. Or at least they don't seem to have any inclination to do it.

It's interesting, isn't it? In Matthew's Gospel in chapter 2, verse 4 you have this group of priests and theologians who answer the Bible's questions about Jesus' birth and the place of it.

You have the same group at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Chapter 27, verse 41 and 42. And they mock. And they scorn. The Saviour has been born.

[10 : 51] So you have these two groups. Do you see the contrast? On the one hand, you have some who knew the facts about Jesus.

And you have the others who adore him. You have some who study about Jesus. You have others who bend the knee to Jesus. It doesn't mean that you can't have both.

But it is interesting, isn't it? That the contrast is here very deliberately. It's quite interesting. The Magi, the wise men, did not get connected with Jesus apart from the scriptures.

The Magi needed the Bible to lead them to worship the king. But Matthew also shows us a group of people that have the light of scriptures and yet it didn't lead them to worship the king.

And that is a great warning for you and for me. Because we immediately put ourselves into the shoes or the sandals of the Magi, don't we? But actually, by analogy, we are the ones who stand in the sandals of the chief priests and the scribes.

[12 : 05] We are the ones we meet today as the professing people of God. Like the Jewish nation was at that time. And here is the warning. You can have a certain amount of knowledge about God, can't you?

You can have a certain amount of knowledge about God's truth. You can have the scriptures. You can answer questions about the scriptures. And somehow your sensibilities have become dull.

And it doesn't move you. They don't bring you the rest of the way to fall down and worship the one of whom the scriptures speak. Somehow it's like we can get almost overexposed to Jesus.

We know a lot about him, but it doesn't lead us to know him. Let me give you a stupid illustration. I don't think, I'm the first one to think of it, but I can't word out who the author was.

Suppose you came in to this building this morning and sitting on the back left hand side was a polar bear. It's a different kind of polar bear.

[13 : 11] It was a massive polar bear. It had orange stripes all over it. It was wearing Adidas trainers on its back feet and it was eating a massive ice cream.

It was a great polar bear sitting at the back. When you came in you took your service sheet, you picked up a Bible and you looked across and you jumped out of your skin and you went to grab one of the deacons or one of the leaders.

What is going on? He shouted. But the bear just sits there eating his ice cream and he doesn't sit. He doesn't move. Doesn't stir. He just sat there as bears do.

Stood for the hymns, opened the Bible reading, sat down. Didn't bother you. You were all a little bit nervous during the service but the bear didn't inflict any harm.

It just sat there licking its ice cream. You would have all sorts of problems with that. And all of you would crowd into the front rows although you have vowed as Presbyterians never ever do that.

[14 : 22] But you would leave very tentatively. Come back the next week. You walk in. The bear is there. The polar bear. And you've got problems. Again. You nervously go through the service.

The following week you come again. You might tremble a little bit but gradually you get used to it. And if the bear kept coming for four weeks, six weeks, ten weeks, eighteen weeks, six months, eight months and that bear was still there and never harmed anyone. He was just always there at eleven a.m. And when he left he just quietly shook my hand on the way out. In the end you wouldn't give it any thought. That is until you brought your friends to church. And as they came into Drake Manor High School they're a bit nervous coming into church anyway. They enter the hall and they grab your sleeve and they say what is that? And you say don't worry. It's just a polar bear eating ice cream. Comes here all the time. Doesn't bother us at all. Don't give it a second thought. Don't worry about it. Now that is a ridiculous illustration isn't it?

[15 : 31] But that is the danger sometimes with our knowledge and our relationship to the Lord Jesus. Maybe we've become so familiar with him that it may be difficult to know him.

And the edge of Jesus' word the sharp edges of Jesus' word may cease to cut us like they ought. And we need to be aware of that.

We can stand in their sandals and we need to ask the Lord Jesus Christ don't we for a soft heart. That all our exposure to his word would not just cause us to have knowledge of him in our heads but we would have leaved a bend to adore him because of the word he gives us.

Now thirdly this visit was important because of the politics involved. Now you see those politics in verse 3 and verse 7 and verse 8. It's the trouble of Herod. So look at verse 3 it says when Herod the king heard this he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

King Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem was troubled and all Jerusalem was troubled because Herod was troubled. You see this Herod that is mentioned here is Herod the Great as he's called he began to reign in 40 BC and he was almost at the end of his reign at this point.

[16 : 51] He was a very very able man a very able king but a very cruel king and especially towards the end of his reign he got more and more suspicious and paranoid.

Paranoid of any rivals that might be raised up to him. In fact during his reign he either arranged the murder or had executed three of his brother-in-laws and one wife who was his passionate favourite. One mother-in-law and three sons among others. And that prompted Augustus to remark that it would be better to be Herod's pig than his son.

And that is why when Herod was troubled all of Jerusalem was troubled. And Herod was troubled because there is another king. A king of the Jews.

Herod was not a king of David's life. He was a Roman appointed king but Herod smells trouble. And some of us think Herod is being irrational.

[17 : 55] Some Christians think that they think well if only I could have half an hour with Herod I'm sure I could calm him down. I'm sure I could explain to Herod there's no real conflict here.

Some Christians would want to say if only Herod you understood the sort of king Jesus is. And if you just realise the kind of kingdom that Jesus is trying to bring in if I could just tell Jesus if I could tell Herod Jesus isn't interested in establishing an earthly and a political kingdom but Jesus kingdom is spiritual and heavenly whatever that is.

Jesus only wants to change the hearts of men Herod and he's got no plan to undermine your regime. Some people would like to say that to Herod. Some Christians. But actually I want to argue with you that Herod is right.

That Herod has understood something very profound. Some Christians would be dying to say to Herod there's a lot of truth in what you say but a lot of error.

Sometimes when we say Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom and a heavenly kingdom. very often those words are used in the sense that Jesus' kingdom doesn't really have any connection with the real world.

[19 : 20] Where there are despots and tyrants and so on but that is not what we believe. Is it? It's not what we pray. It's not what you have prayed.

Because we have prayed this morning and said your kingdom come. Your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.

And what does it mean for God's kingdom to come? What does it mean for God's kingdom to come in its fullness? It means what the next phrase is, isn't it? Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is that spiritual certainty because it is God's kingdom. Is it spiritual? Yes, of course it is. Is it political? You bet it is.

Because eventually it is going to come. God's will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And that is very political.

[20 : 25] And we need to be aware. Because there's a sense in which even reformed Christians can make Jesus a religious figure, a very safe religious figure.

And we don't say he is political. But he is. The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

And if we don't believe that Jesus kingdom is political, then we've got to turn the psalm to him, we've got to rip it out of our Bibles. My concern, and my point is that there is a sense in which Harold is right on target.

He's right on target about the political situation. What is that going to be? When is that going to be? The point is that Jesus did not come in his first coming to establish that kingdom to be sure that these are not just figures of speech.

When the Bible says kings will bow down before him and pay homage to him, when it says all nations will serve him, the Bible speaks of that as truth.

[21 : 32] there is this political aspect. The time will come when Jesus' kingdom will come and his reign has to do with real nations and real kings and real despots.

Why do you think political powers persecute the church? They know, don't they? They know that the church is a body that prays subversive prayers.

we come and meet subversively this morning. We pray prayers like your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So I think Herod has got his words about it. He may not have realised the whole pattern of Jesus' kingdom, but he knew that if there was another king, he himself was not the king.

And that troubled him. And that is something that we must continually remind ourselves of. And it's something that we must remind the world's rulers of when we get the opportunity.

[22 : 35] Whether it's Theresa May or Donald Trump, or Kim Yomain, or Vladimir Putin, whoever it is, they are not the ultimate king.

The politics comes home to us. Each of us, doesn't it? Each of us has a Herod nature in ourselves. none of us like the idea of someone else reigning in our place.

And when we hear that the Lord Jesus Christ is just that, he is Lord, and he is the king, and that the custom of kings is to rule, and if Jesus is the king, well that means I'm not.

And he will rule my life. And that means I don't have sway anymore. more. And that can make me just as troubled. Herod gets Christmas right.

Herod realises someone's got to die. Someone's got to die. That's another sermon. These are the politics that are involved.

[23 : 42] And then Matthew says this visit is important because of the providence that's involved. Do you see that? The providence that's involved. Look at verse 12. Sarat says of his scheme, verse 7 and 8.

He told those magi, are you sending them to Bethlehem? And he says, you fellas, you come back to me. When you search for this child and you find him, bring him backwards so that I can go and worship him too. It's pious sounding gobbledegook.

But that was his plan. His plan was that these men would do his bidding. He schemes, he plots. And when they finally come to report to him the location of the child, he would proceed to go and not worship but liquidate his newest rival.

A little mole blood never upset Herod's stomach. So this was his plan. I will wait for these weird astrologers from the east to come back and then I will proceed. And it's interesting, verse 12, it says, doesn't it, I'm being warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

They departed to their own country by another way. And it's interesting, isn't it, that the most well laid plans by an earthly tyrant, the most cunning, crafty ways by the rulers of this world are stood on their head by the God of heaven, by a mere dream.

[25 : 03] And that is what happens, God's providence is operating. this mysterious and yet clear manner of his working, in order to preserve his kingdom and his people.

And we know, don't we, we know that it doesn't guarantee each one of us that we will have immunity from every distress. But it does say here, it does imply that no earthly tyrant, no matter how powerful he may seem, can proceed to destroy God's king and God's kingdom.

It only takes a dream to upset the leaders of the world. Don't be led away by the quietness in verse 12.

Don't be led astray by that. There's no trumpet and fanfare, there's no earthquake, there's just being warned in a dream. And some of us need to learn that in the providence that God works in our lives, it is very, very often undramatic and unspectacular.

And so carry this over into your own life, God's providence. That God is only present in your life if there is noise that's rubbish.

[26 : 24] Or if there's something dramatic. God works out his plans very quietly. And you need to have your ears turned, tuned, and your eyes strange.

Or you might miss the quiet working of the God of heaven working on behalf of his people. It is a most important visit because of the place, and because of the people, and because of the politics, and because of the providence of God.

And Matthew hopes that you will never forget it. Let's pray. of the little of the people. tell you a little Let's a little