

Matthew 2:1-12

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[0 : 00] If you could turn to page 7 in the sheet that you were given, I'm going to speak from Matthew 2 and verses 1-12. And there's an abundance of sermon title puns from this chapter.

So, Stars, Schemes and Dreams. Or you might have heard Wise Men Worship Jesus Still. Star Trek, to name a few.

But I think there's no story of Jesus' birth that's been more distorted over the years. Let me try and prove my point with a quiz. You're not going to shout out. You can whisper your answers to the person next to you.

But let me ask you some questions. How many wise men were there? What were their names? How did they get to Jerusalem? No shouting out. When did they arrive?

What country were they from? And if you know the answers to those questions, you're probably more familiar with sentimental carols and tradition than with what the Bible says about them.

[1 : 07] Let me give you the answers to the quiz. We don't know how many wise men there were. There could have been three. There could have been ten. I'd quite like to think there were 500. We don't know that Casper, Melchior, Balthazar were their names.

We don't know their names. We don't know how they got there. There's no mention of camels. I think we can safely rule out one on a bus, one on a car, one on a scooter.

The belongings to two. They didn't arrive at Christmas night. They went to a house. And not a stable. And all we know about them is that they're from the east.

And so Matthew, who wrote this gospel, is very short on Christmas trimmings. There's no stable. There's no shepherds. It's a very plain account. But he's very, very clear on who and why we're celebrating tonight.

In the last verse of Matthew chapter 1, we're told Jesus was born. And in verse 2 of chapter 2, it tells us that we celebrate the birth of God's king.

[2 : 19] Jesus, and not the wise men, however many there were, is the hero of the story. Two points for you tonight. First of all, the contrast of the kings, and then the contrast of the responses.

So look at verses 1 and 2 on page 7. Can you do that? Look down with me. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

We saw his star in the east, and we've come to worship him. When you put them together, you don't have to be very astute, do you, to realise that there's two kings.

There's King Herod, verse 1, and then there's the king of the Jews. That's not an editorial coincidence. It is a deliberate statement.

Herod was the man-made king. Jesus is the God-born king. Let's look at that contrast. Herod, he's half Jew, he's half Edomite.

[3 : 20] But Herod, the man-made king, he was appointed king by the Roman Senate about 40 BC. You can look him up in history. King Herod was an outsider. In fact, he was a vicious outsider.

He killed his mother. He killed his favourite wife. And so you wonder what happened to the least favourite. He killed at least three of his sons. His reign is characterised by paranoia.

He was always vulnerable to a king rising up, to a true Israelite. King Herod had sleepless nights about a king from the true Davidic dynasty.

That somebody would come from King David's line. Think of that situation today, where there's a royal line. But now there's someone else on the throne. And of course, that someone else would be vulnerable.

Herod hears the news he's been dreading for decades. There's another king. A king of the Jews. Jesus, well, he's got the credentials.

[4 : 26] If you go back to right at the start of Matthew's Gospel, the very first verse says, Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. It's telling you right from the start, Jesus is definitely in the royal line.

And so you see Herod, the man appointed king, is terrified. Can you see in verse 2, this baby has been born king.

He's not born to be king. He's in the royal line. And he's born in the right place. He's born in the little town of Bethlehem.

And that quote that we're given there in verse 6, is from the Old Testament. It's from the Old Testament prophet Micah. This king has been born in the right place.

He's geographically authentic. So what we're being told in Matthew 2, is in the words of the carol, the hopes and fears of all the years are met indeed tonight.

[5 : 28] The promised one of the Old Testament, God's long promised king, has arrived. And incredibly, Herod gets that. There's more contrast.

What kind of king will Jesus be? Will he be like King Herod, the tyrant? And the contrast is not only in their origin, but in the nature of their kingship. I think tragically, sometimes people can look at Christianity and think that Jesus is a tyrant telling you what you can and can't do.

That Jesus makes demands on your time, your money. He tells you who you can sleep with and who you can't sleep with. But if you look at verse 6, just over the page, on page 8, look what it says about this king.

For out of you will come a ruler who will be a shepherd of my people. And that idea of a king who's also a shepherd is throughout the Old Testament.

I think Matthew is drawing here from when King David was crowned king of Israel. And we're told in 1 Samuel 5 verse 2, you shall shepherd my people Israel and you shall become their ruler.

[6 : 43] Here is the king in David's line, but he's the king in fulfillment to David. He is the king, but he's also a shepherd. He rules.

But how does he rule? He rules as a caring shepherd. What does a good shepherd do? A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Do you remember Herod? He is the one who will kill to keep his throne. But Jesus is the one who will die because he's on the throne.

You see, Herod was troubled when he heard the news of the king of the Jews and all Jews slim with them. They sensed a threat. They knew of Herod's paranoia.

He'd killed his mother, his wife, at least two of his sons. They had good reason to fear. But in chapter 2 in verse... Chapter 2, we're told that he will be a shepherd. There's a joke at the time when this was written, which spoke that it was a rhyme in the original, that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

[7 : 51] This man killed for his throne. But the one the wise men wanted to see will die, not because he is forced off his throne, but he will die for his people.

He will give his life for the sheep. Matthew tells us that at his birth and at his death, he's given a title, isn't he? The king of the Jews. And so there's a choice for the wise men.

As there is a choice for each one of us tonight. There's the pomp and the rank and the visible power of the Herods of this world. Or there's the seeming weakness and vulnerability and near invisibility of God's king.

And the Magi, they chose wisely. Well, we know, don't we, from 2,000 years, Herod is dead and gone, isn't he? Herod was an important man, a very important man, but his kingdom was small. And even in his time, Herod was not the most important person in the world. As far as I'm aware, there is nobody who is worshipping Herod tonight. As far as I'm aware, there is nobody that will celebrate Herod's birthday.

[9 : 05] Nobody says, I follow Herod's rule. But the king of the Jews born that night is a universal and everlasting king. There's a clue to that.

Where are the Magi from? The Magi are from the east, aren't they? They are not Jewish. If you go back to the Old Testament, you will see that there's this promise again and again and again that God's king will be a universal king for all people and for all time.

Psalms 72 says this, it was like the national anthem for the people of Israel. May he, that's God's king, have dominion from sea to sea, from rivers to the ends of the earth. May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute.

May the kings of Sheba and Sheba bring him gifts. May all kings fall down before him and all nations serve him. Blessed be his glorious name forever. May the whole earth be filled with his glory.

What Matthew is telling you, that what Israel looked for and prayed for is beginning to happen. We are seeing in miniature in Matthew chapter 2 that the king of the Jews is actually the king of the nations.

[10:18] The promise is given in the Old Testament that God is going to bless all the nations is here being fulfilled. The nations are coming to Jesus.

An international mighty king who will rule over his people forever. And so here in Matthew 2 is the beginning of many nations coming to Jesus.

Millions upon millions upon millions have since done that. People like me who are not Jewish who have been cut into the story.

And Matthew at the end of his book says exactly the same thing. He says, go into all the world and tell people about this universal and everlasting king. You see, Matthew 2 is telling you that the baby or the toddler as he is in Matthew 2 is God's king and so get on your knees and worship him.

And if this is the start of God's plan what will it be like when Jesus comes back? We're told, do you know what will happen then? The Bible says when Jesus comes back every knee will bow whether you've bowed the knee before or not.

[11:33] Mohammed's knee will bow. Piers Morgan's knee will bow. The Dalai Lama will bow his knee. Rishi Sunak, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, they will bow their knee before King Jesus.

You will bow your knee. And will you bow your knee now or will you bow your knee then?

And if I was you I would make sure I bow my knee now and worship the universal king. The contrast of the kings. But secondly the contrast of responses.

He's the universal king but that doesn't mean that he's universally acclaimed and welcomed. There are different responses aren't there? I think there are three. Firstly there's the Magi. We don't know anything about them apart from this passage.

What did they know? But it seems they must have known some of the Jewish scriptures to be looking for the king of the Jews. It's absolutely remarkable isn't it? They see the star and they trek.

[12:39] They trek to Jerusalem where they expected the child to be born. That's where you'd expect the child to be born in the capital city. And then they go on to Bethlehem where they're told to.

And they give Jesus gifts. Some have put special emphasis on the gifts. Some have said it's gold for a king, frankincense for a prophet, myrrh for a priest. I'm not completely sure about that.

But the gifts that they gave were of great value. And you have to wonder that they went so far with so little to go on. They eagerly arrive at Jerusalem.

And they talk with Herod. And Herod is troubled. He is so troubled that he gets the theologians in. The religious guys. And they know where the king of the Jews is going to be born.

They know that Bethlehem is the birthplace of the promised king. But they can't be bothered to go there themselves. The wise men, they have so little to go on.

[13:45] But the chief priests and the teachers of the law, they have so much, but they're not going to stir. And Matthew again is deliberately contrasting for you.

He is showing you the eagerness of the Magi to worship Jesus. Despite their limited knowledge. And he contrasts it with the apathy of the Jewish leaders.

Apathy isn't new. What does apathy mean? I don't care, you say. It means, isn't it?

You can't be bothered. It's really frightening, isn't it? That some of us can know our Bibles and you can be really familiar with the story of Christmas like many of us are.

But that doesn't necessarily lead to knowing and loving Jesus. If the chief priests and the teachers of the law were around today, they'd be church leaders.

[14:47] Incredibly well read, incredibly sophisticated. They'd be the religious establishment. But they still wouldn't know and love Jesus. You see, for the Magi, no trouble is too great for them.

For the Pharisees and the religious leaders, they cannot be bothered. And their apathy in the end led to opposition. Herod's devious plan shows he's against Jesus right from the off, isn't it?

He's threatened by him. And so even at his birth, can you see, Jesus is dividing people into two camps just like he's dividing us into two camps. Those who are for him and those who are against him.

What's the result of these three responses? Well, verse 10, for the Magi, they saw the star and they're overjoyed.

And they come to the house, they see the child with his mother Mary, they bow down and they worship him. They open up their treasures, they present him with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

[15 : 53] Can you just see the response? They came and they worshipped Jesus. What did they experience? They experienced great joy. Exceedingly great joy.

I wonder whether you know anything of that. That is real Christianity. That is the reason we as a church exist.

That is what we're inviting you into tonight. Real exceeding joy. How will you react to King Jesus? Will you search for him? Will you look for him? Will you read about him? Come back on a Sunday and find out more about him. It's really why we're so excited about this course Hope Explored.

It's going to run on three Wednesdays in January. Wednesday the 10th and the 17th and the 24th. And it's an opportunity for you to hear more about Jesus and hear more about what he claims and to hear more about that exceedingly great joy that he offers you.

[17 : 03] Come with your questions. Come with your concerns. Come with your doubts. You'd be really really welcome. Three Wednesdays in January. will you be a fool and not bother ignore him maybe think he's unimportant maybe box him up with the other Christmas decorations get him out again next year.

That is a tragic mistake. I beg you don't do it. Or will you recognise that the baby born in Bethlehem is God's King whom God has sent into this world to bring you exceedingly great joy.

Let's bow before him now and let's pray. pray.