

Matthew 2:1-23

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[0 : 00] This time of year, lots of people are full of fun and joy and excitement and anticipation. They get the festive vibe and it's good cheer all round.

! But that's not true for everyone, is it? For some people, Christmas this season is a sad and hard time.

More people than ever are struggling with loneliness and the fact that so many gather with friends and family at this time of year makes that feel worse. And more difficult. And that sadness can often come from those who are no longer there.

This Christmas, there will be some of us who will be celebrating and there will be an empty chair. However beautiful the Christmas table, it's really that empty chair that casts its long and difficult shadow.

Many of us can relate to that kind of pain, pain for other reasons as well. For others, Christmas is just flat out annoying.

[1 : 04] I hate it, I read this recently in the media, I hate it when December comes around. I will break fingers if anybody tries to change my car stereo to a Christmas music channel. I make it clear that I want absolutely no gifts, so I don't have to feel obligated to reciprocate.

I used to enjoy Christmas as a time to get with family and enjoy good times, whether you had gifts to exchange or not. I grew up dirt poor and still loved Christmas, until my insane family, both through marriage and otherwise, robbed me of that.

Sigh. Okay, please tell me I'm not alone in doing a little internal dance when December the 26th throws around. Okay, altogether now, joy to the world, let's sing.

We can probably relate to at least one of these or understand how others will find the Christmas season joyful or painful or annoying. But one response that I doubt you will offer if I ask the how do you feel about Christmas question is that you find it threatening.

Threatening. Threatening. The carols, the mince pies, the turkey, the gifts, they don't pose any threat. Of course, nobody's going to suggest that Christmas is threatening.

[2 : 18] And yet, threatened is exactly how Matthew tells us people felt on that very first Christmas. Now, in this Advent series, we started back in Genesis chapter 3 with the promise that God made to send a serpent-crushing, conquering son into the world.

Last week in Isaiah chapter 11, we saw that this son would be God's righteous king who would bring in God's kingdom of peace. And this morning, we see what happens when that king finally turns up on that first Christmas.

And at the outset, Matthew is at pains here to make sure that we know that the one born in the manger is indeed that promised king. Look at verse 1. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men, magi, from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. So we have the magi using his title, king of the Jews. And we have the star supernaturally capturing their attention and taking them, verse 9, to exactly the right spot where Jesus is in residence.

Back in the Old Testament, Numbers chapter 24, Balaam prophesied of a coming king. He said this, I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob.

[3 : 42] A scepter will rise out of Israel. That's what they're waiting for. Here is the star drawing their attention to where he will be. That is then confirmed further by the scriptures.

Verse 6, As Herod gathers his Bible experts to clarify where it was said that Christ, God's king, was to be born. Verse 5, They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea.

For so it is written by the prophet, And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. That's a combination of two Old Testament texts.

Micah 5, 2, 2 Samuel 5, 2. Both of which identify the Messiah's birthplace as Bethlehem in Judea, in Judah. And then there are the gifts.

Verse 11, Opening their treasures they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. You might have seen last month the royal family are being hassled over not declaring certain expensive gifts that they have received as they've traveled around.

[4 : 44] I mean given gifts by different people, jewelry and the like. Well I wonder how HMRC would get on with these gifts. Gold, the most precious thing there was.

Frankincense, an expensive perfumed resin. And myrrh, it's an exotic spice. This is top end luxury. These are gifts fit only for a king.

Point is the long awaited Messiah, the one that the Old Testament has spoken about is here. He is finally here. But rather than celebrate, look again at verse 3.

When Herod, the king, heard this, he was troubled. He was annoyed. Why was he annoyed? Well because the one in the manger is a threat to Herod's authority and rule.

He is God's king coming into the world. He is a threat to Herod's authority. And that's our first point. I want us to see the one born at Christmas is a threat to political power. He is a threat to political power.

[5 : 48] Notice how Matthew makes the point. Verse 1, Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king. Down again, verse 3. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled.

Verse 9, After listening to the king. We are talking about the birth of a king. But there is a problem because there is another one who is the king. There is another who thinks that he holds the authority.

When the Magi arrived asking to see the one who has been born king of the Jews, Herod was thinking, hang on a minute. I am the king around here. I am the one with authority.

I am in charge. The birth of Jesus under the realm of Herod the king opens up for us a tale really of two kings. And Herod knows that the one in the manger is really the true king.

He is a threat to his rule. Jesus is an enemy of his godless state. And of course what does political power always do when confronted with the threat of King Jesus?

[6 : 53] Try to get rid of him. Ignore him. Reject him. Airbrush him out of society. And of course increasingly we see this at Christmas.

Happy holidays. Season's greetings. We are going this weekend to the winter fair. A letter comes home from school.

Dear parent, we are so pleased to have such a diverse school and we are delighted that we can replace the nativity this year with some other meaningless nonsense. It is just subtle, isn't it?

It is not season's greetings. This is Christmas. And it does not matter what culture you are in across the world. It is Christmas. This is a celebration of the incarnation of God's king coming into the world.

Now whatever we might do here with Christmas cards that say happy holidays, Herod is even more radical. Look at verse 7. Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

[8 : 05] And he sent them to Bethlehem saying, Go and search diligently for the child and when you have found him, bring me word that I may too come and worship him. Of course, there is a veneer of respectability.

Go and find the child so I can join in the worship that he is due. But we already know from verse 3 that he is annoyed. He is annoyed about this new king. And that becomes clear as we read on. Herod is so desperate to hold on to power that he will go on a murderous rampage to protect his position. The wise men find the child but they don't tell him.

And when Herod realizes he has been tricked, look at verse 16. He became furious and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem. And in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping in loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted

because they are no more.

[9 : 12] If he can't find the specific child, he will work out when it was born and kill all the boys born around them to make sure he gets them.

It is savage brutality. It doesn't sound very Christmassy, does it? And yet that's the reality of that first Christmas.

The arrival of God's king was a threat to the political power structures of the day. So they tried to get rid of him by any means possible. We often think of Christmas, I think, as a time when we put our politics to one side.

We have furtive conversations about seating arrangements at Christmas to make sure that Uncle Joe, who has recently joined Reform, isn't sat anywhere near Helen, who is in her second year of PPE.

In more than a few homes, while waiting for guests to arrive, someone will say, Now don't you start on Brexit or Remain or immigration or the economy. Don't do that.

[10 : 18] Don't worry darling, discretion is my middle name, you know that. You said that last time. And Angela still isn't speaking to me. That kind of thing goes on.

Christmas is no time for politics, we say. We don't want to kill the vibe. Christmas is inescapably political. By which I mean, as soon as you declare that Jesus is God's king, you are making a political statement.

Because if Jesus is Lord, that means no one else can be. If Jesus is Lord, he is Lord of everyone. Whatever they think, whatever they believe, and whatever office they hold in any given state.

Jesus is Lord of Herod. He is Lord of Keir Starmer, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping. And he calls them all to repent and to turn to him and to use their authority to glorify him, to acknowledge him when they make their laws.

Jesus is Lord of every newspaper editor, every podcast host, every talking political head, and every author. And he calls them all to repent and turn to him and to use their influence to glorify him, to acknowledge his supremacy when they write and speak.

[11 : 44] At Christ's first advent, the king of heaven and earth came into this world. And the political machinery of the day felt the threat. You should be absolutely unashamed to say this as those who name his name.

You can't have private Christian faith. You can't have merely personal Christian faith, or Christian faith that endorses a secular public space in the name of democracy or pluralism or anything like that.

You can't have a Jesus who is only for your family or the church or your in crowd. Jesus is God's promised king, and he is Lord of all, every single square inch.

Herod knew that, and that is why he tried to get rid of him. Well, Jesus isn't just a threat to Herod or to political power, but there is more in verse 3 that we also need to see.

Jesus is also a threat to personal control, a threat to our personal control. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

[12 : 56] All Jerusalem realized the significance of the king's arrival. Christmas is a threat to us all. Because the truth is that none of us, by nature, want what it brings.

You see, all of us, because we are sinners, because we are rebels in God's world by nature, none of us want to live under the authority of God's king. That is threatening to us, and so we try and get rid of him just the way Herod did.

Now, of course, we don't go on a murderous rampage. Sometimes it's polite indifference. We might come along to a carol service at this time of year, but really we can get ahead without him. We don't really need to pay any attention to Jesus.

Sometimes, of course, it's more hostile than that. You absolutely hate Christmas like the woman that I quoted at the start, not because of the insincerity and the hassle and the way that family had destroyed the experience for her, but because you just don't want Jesus in your life.

You don't want his authority in any shape or form. We all of us have independence so deeply hardwired into us that we think that submission to anyone else is completely out.

[14 : 08] And submission taking ourselves out of the center of our lives and putting the Lord Jesus at the center, we think that will diminish us in some way. We'll lose out in some way.

It will make us less than we could really be. And so we don't do it. And we go off in all kinds of other directions to try and find inner peace, to try and find contentment and joy and satisfaction in the

world.

And we'll go in any direction in order to find it apart from Jesus. But the truth is that our lives and our city and our world are proof that this just simply doesn't work.

Even at Christmas, perhaps especially at this time of year, just look at the brokenness all around us. At your work Christmas parties, listen to the hurt and the frustration and the stress that the alcohol brings out.

Watch how the occasion gives people the excuse to blow out, trying to escape, even if it's just for a moment, from the mundane, the difficult, the painful, the brokenness of life.

[15:19] Here's the thing. That brokenness is honest about the world that we live in, about the reality of our experience in a fallen world.

But it will only be fixed through bringing ourselves under the rule of King Jesus. It's striking.

Matthew 2 is really presenting us with a choice between two masters.

We all give ourselves to some kind of master. That is, we all devote ourselves to something in life that we feel will give us what we want. Bob Dylan, you've got to serve somebody. That's true.

We are. We are worshipping serving beings. And so we give ourselves to something. We worship, serve somebody or something. And Matthew has ordered this chapter to show us the two possible options.

There are only two. Either we have a tyrannical master, Herod. And Herod here could stand for anything that consumes our lives. Anything that we devote ourselves to that doesn't cause us to flourish as we should.

[16:25] This could even be good things. You can give yourself to a good thing and it becomes a tyranny in your life. You can devote yourself to a relationship or to family or to career success. And when those things have come into your life at the center of things, those things will become a master that crushes you.

A tyranny. Even good things, when they're elevated to ultimate things, become bad masters. So that's one side. We can have a tyrannical master.

Or we can have a master who brings us freedom and joy and peace with God. Look at verse 10.

That is what the Magi discovered when they encountered Jesus.

Look at verse 10. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. The star that was going to take them to God's King was the one who would bring joy.

They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Here's the heart of Christmas. Here's really the essence of it all. The King, the people have been waiting for, has come.

[17:32] And this joy is what comes to us when we bow the knee to Him. He brings peace with God. Because He brings forgiveness for our sin.

Freedom from our slavery to our appetites. He does that not in His coming, but in His death at Easter. As He goes to the cross on Good Friday. As He takes in Himself the punishment for our sins in our place.

And three days later, He rises again to new life. All of these things come to us through the one born at Christmas, through His death and resurrection. That is what He offers.

That is what this King offers. But we must bow the knee to Him. We must acknowledge His authority and surrender personal control of our lives to Him.

Yes, it's true. The kingly rule of Jesus Christ does threaten us. But it need not do so.

[18:32] Because these wise men, the Magi, they show us that submission to this king is the way to joy. Joy in the present, even through the trials of life in a broken world.

And the fullness of joy in eternity. Far from diminishing us. Far from taking from us.

Submission to King Jesus is the way to joy and a life. Life in all its fullness. So I guess the challenge for us is choose your king. Choose your king.

It's one or the other. You either stand with Jesus or you stand with Herod. One of those will bring joy. The other will bring tyranny. Yes, Jesus does threaten our independence.

But when we trust ourselves to Him, He gives us... Well, what He gives us in return is far better.

Well, the kingly rule of Jesus doesn't just threaten us personally.

[19:41] It also threatens our vision of Christmas. Here are some implications of recognizing Him for who He is and recognizing what that means for this time of year. You see, as you read the story, it's full of drama.

It's full of near misses, the second half. Verse 12, the Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. That could have worked out very differently. Verse 13, verse 19, the angel of the Lord is guiding Joseph in his dreams.

What's going on here is that God is ensuring that Jesus is kept and that the Old Testament was fulfilled. So the reality is the Christmas story ultimately belongs to God.

God is in complete control throughout the narrative here, unfolding His plan. And when you see that, when you recognize that the Christmas story is about God bringing His king into the world and making sure that His plan goes exactly as it should, that the Old Testament promises are all completely fulfilled.

When you recognize that the fear of Herod here and the joy of the wise men and the generosity of their gifts, when you recognize those things, that the world is called the world.

[20 : 52] And here is the world. Modern visions of Christmas are ruled out as well. So the sentimental view of Christmas, where Christmas is sweet, the cozy manger scene, or the sweet-looking angel on the Christmas card, or the perfect Christmas family photo, or the idea that everybody must just get on and for a few days there is nothing but sweetness and light.

Christmas is about God's king coming to turn the world upside down. And the ensuing conflict as the political elite of the day turn to murder in order to try and stop his rule.

There's nothing sentimental or sweet about Christmas. Another modern vision of Christmas that's ruled out is the moralistic vision. Where Christmas is sinless.

So Christ came into the world, his arrival. It was a threat to human autonomy because we are rebels in his world. There is lots of talk this time of year about goodwill to all men.

And there is lots of people being nicer to other people. And thinking to themselves, going to try hard to change and be a better person. The way Ebenezer Scrooge has changed in A Christmas Carol.

[22 : 11] But giving to the poor and being extra generous to charity at this time of year when the buckets go round, when they're given a shake. That's not the point of Christmas.

And it won't get to the bottom of our problem of sin. Now of course be generous by all means. But don't think that this is what Christmas is really about.

Christmas is about the Son of God coming into the world to save us from ourselves. Not inspire us to be better versions of ourselves. And I also want to suggest there's a third vision of Christmas that we must also reject.

And that's what I'll call spiritual Christmas. Where Christmas is, well, spiritual. So what I mean is, in wanting to reject the excesses of materialism, these people run the other way.

So we don't do gifts. We don't make a fuss. No special food. No special drink. We simply celebrate the incarnation of Jesus in our hearts. That's presented by some as a kind of noble, virtuous approach to Christmas.

[23 : 22] Jesus was a flesh and blood baby. He was a real physical material gift to Mary and to the world. The Magi brought real gold, real frankincense and real myrrh to express their love and devotion to the Lord.

You might say, oh, they give to the Lord. We give gifts to each other. And of course the culture has gone completely mad on that front. And that is true. But we should still give gifts.

And we should still celebrate. Because in our gift giving, we are remembering that God gave the ultimate gift to us in the Lord Jesus. He didn't do that spiritually in our hearts somewhere.

But in a real and physical and tangible way. And that generosity was unsurpassable. Giving and receiving gifts enables us to realize again the significance of what happened in Bethlehem.

And declares to the world the wonder of God becoming man for us. The Christian life is physical. Christmas is physical.

[24 : 29] We're about to eat and drink. In a meal that the Lord has instituted for us. Real physical elements. Let's not overly spiritualize. Our relationship with the Lord.

The coming of Jesus isn't sweet. It threatens political power. It threatens our personal control. But don't forget, as I've said this morning, the answer to that threat is not to run from it, but to run to it.

Run to Him. To the Lord Jesus. And we discover there that the threat turns to a welcome. He saves us from our sin. And so in Him then there is really the experience of the Magi Israel.

There is exceeding joy. This is why we celebrate. Let's pray together.