

## **The 5 Kings of Christmas**

### **Matthew 2:1-23**

A couple of years ago an article came out of the UK which spoke about the lengths parents would go to in order to deck out their kids for the annual Christmas play:

*This year competitive parents in Britain are splashing out to send the Virgin Mary on her way to Bethlehem swathed in a pashmina, and to ensure the angel Gabriel is a vision in pristine 200-thread Egyptian cotton. Yesterday, a department store chain said its personal shopping teams had been struck by the number of people spending up to £150 [\$A270] on "manger chic". Parents have been snapping up ivory bridesmaid dresses to transform their little girls into angels. A grey hooded duffle coat is also popular - with the addition of ears, it is said to make the perfect donkey costume.*

And while everyone's trying to look their best for the school Christmas play, it seems that some schools have forgotten how the play is supposed to unfold. I read another report where some schools have replaced baby Jesus:

*I have seen performances where the central character has not been Jesus, says one person in the UK Telegraph, Instead he is replaced by an angel or a sheep, and I think that's a shame.*

According to these newspaper reports, the Christmas story is under attack! The humility of Jesus—born in a stable, placed in a manger—that's replaced by a parade of tweens dressed in sequins. And the centrality of Jesus, that's replaced by something more friendly and less confrontational.

Well tonight I'm here to tell you that perhaps we've been getting it wrong all along. Perhaps the school Christmas play has always been a little off the mark. When you read the Christmas story in the Scriptures, you come across characters that don't often get a look in when the roles are distributed in the classroom. And there are scenes that no kindergarten teacher dare direct; scenes of quite serious horror and violence. And when we reflect on the Bible's account of the Christmas story, we find we're asked questions we might not be used to hearing at Christmas.

The section of the Christmas story we're reflecting on tonight is found in Matthew Chapter 2. Come with me to the opening verses of the chapter.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

These are the verses that gave me the title of my sermon – can you see the five Kings? We have King Herod, we have Jesus, King of the Jews, and then we have the three kings who have come from the east. In actual fact, we don't know that they were three in number. We assume three because they had three gifts: gold, myrrh and frankincense. And also, they weren't actually kings! The Bible tells us they were *magi*, and the magi were astrologers who would serve in the king's

court by giving advice based on what they saw in the stars. But I'm happy to call them kings because it gives me a snappy title for this sermon! When I was in year one at school I played one of the magi in our school play. I was carrying gold which in our play was a pile of yellow lego bricks; no 'manger chic' in our western suburbs school.

And of course the thing which brought the Magi to Jerusalem was the appearance of a bright star in the east. Let's talk a little bit about this star. Throughout the years different explanations have been offered about it. Some say it's a meteor, but for a meteor it seems to move rather slowly; they see it in the east and it's still there when they arrive in Jerusalem. Some say it was a comet, but for all the reoccurring comets we know about none were observable at this particular time in history. And it doesn't seem to be your regular heavenly light. The magi made a living by looking up into the heavens; they would have had access to records about what stars were appearing when. If this was a normal celestial event they wouldn't have taken much notice. And for a regular heavenly light it seems to act fairly strangely; it moves and then stops. It's low enough in the sky to clearly stop over one house in Bethlehem. It's a really strange thing this star.

But these opening chapters of Matthew's Gospel are full of strange occurrences. In Chapter 1 we read that Mary gave birth while being a virgin (That's another aspect of the nativity story that is never really explored in your average primary school production). And then we have angels appearing in dreams. What's going on?

Well I think Matthew is telling us that *this child is extraordinary*. And the extraordinary circumstances surrounding his birth—the virgin birth, the angels, the star—they point him out as no ordinary child. And these events surrounding his birth are only the beginning. If you read all the way through Matthew's Gospel, you see Jesus healing the sick, you see Jesus walking on water, you see Jesus crucified and then raised from the dead. The life story of Jesus is full of extraordinary, hard to believe events.

But here's the thing which amazes me. The gospel writers report all this with a straight face and with *transparency*. They use names of people, they describe the places where these things happened, and so anyone reading this account could have checked out the facts. Someone could have gone to Bethlehem and they could have grabbed a local.

"So back when King Herod was around, any strange things happen?"

"Yeah there was this really bright star, and it stopped over this young family and there were these guys from the east..."

The gospels don't read like they're pushing a conspiracy theory. They invite questioning, and they could've easily been dismissed, but you see they weren't dismissed. The stories of Jesus stood up to the test and so people started to worship him. They worshiped Jesus just like these astrologers from the east.

In verse 2 they announce that they have come to worship the one who has been born king of the Jews. And further along in v 10 they are granted their wish. On making their way to Bethlehem they see the star and are overjoyed:

<sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

These three gifts were valuable items back in those times (gold still is today!), and with these gifts the wise men demonstrate that they know the importance of the one they've come to see. But think for a moment about their reaction upon discovering the infant Jesus. Was their response simply one which admired the cuteness of the child?

"What a cute little bubba there lying in the straw!"

Was their response one which celebrated their powers of astrology?

"Yep here he is, our star gazing powers are really hot!"

No, their response was to *worship* him. And from what we see in the rest of Matthew, this is the right response. In Chapter one we read that Jesus will be called "Immanuel", "God is with us". This baby is God in human form; he's a baby worthy of worship. And, somehow, the Magi knew this. Maybe they knew something of the OT prophecies, maybe God has spoken to them directly, but somehow they knew and so they came *to worship*.

And their response of worship will be very different to the next character we meet. Have a look at verse 3. After the Magi announce they want to worship Jesus, Herod has a reaction.

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

This is where we start to travel in more unfamiliar territory. I have never seen a nativity play with King Herod. Who was this guy? Let me give you some background. At the time of Jesus, Israel had been conquered by the Roman Empire, and what the Romans would do is appoint a local to rule on their behalf. And the guy they chose to rule in Israel was Herod the Great. He was given the title, "King of the Jews."

Now we know from other sources outside the Bible that Herod was a brutal ruler. He became famous for squashing political opponents with great acts of violence. He even killed his own two Sons because he saw them as a threat. And so you can imagine how he might have felt when these Magi turn up and say to everyone, "We understand that a new King of the Jews has been born. We want to worship him"

Matthew reports that when King Herod heard this he was disturbed. Probably an understatement. What's interesting is the next phrase and all Jerusalem with him

They knew what he was like! “Oh man, Herod’s about to loose it again, what’s he going to do this time”

And so Herod starts to get his people together.

“Ok so the OT says that there will be a Messiah, a King for God’s people. Where about does it say He’ll be born?”

“Your majesty, the prophet Micah says he’ll be born in Bethlehem”

So Herod calls the Magi

“Gentlemen, welcome to our land, I want to help you on your quest. The person you’re looking for, you’ll find him in Bethlehem, that’s just south of here. Good luck! Oh, and when you find him could you tell me where he is, Because I too want to go and ‘worship’ him. Yes, that’s right... I want to go and ‘worship’ him.”

Of course Herod doesn’t want to go and worship at all, he wants to go and kill this new challenger to his title! But when the Magi hot-tail it back to the east without reporting back the people’s worst fears are realised. Herod flips it. Skip down to verse 16

When Herod realized that he had 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, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

This is why we never learn about Herod in Primary school. You’ll never see this scene played out by class 2N. The horror is shocking and it was *premeditated*. Do you remember he asked the Magi when they saw the star? He was planning this massacre in case his first plan fell through. If the Magi couldn’t lead him directly to this *challenger for the throne*, then he was just going to kill every boy who fitted the description.

What we have here amounts to the starkest of contrasts. On one hand we have the Magi, who willingly and joyfully bow down to Jesus, and on the other we have a man who refuses to bow down and worship, a man who goes to cruel and murderous lengths to preserve his own rule. a man who takes swift and callous action to preserve his own kingship.

Here we have a story about the most fundamental of choices. We heard earlier about the schools that were choosing whether or not to have Jesus at the centre of the Christmas story, well this choice over whether we should accept Jesus or reject him goes back to the very first Christmas. And so this startling and, for some of us, this unfamiliar scene leads us to a startling and unfamiliar question: Whose response are we most likely to imitate? Will we worship Jesus, or will we reject him?

“Now just wait a minute!” You might say “You can’t possibly possibly be saying that we could somehow be like Herod! He was a mass murderer of infants! How dare you compare me with him!”

I’m not suggesting that you’re a murder of infants, But I am asking the question, *are you a worshipper of this infant?* Have you bowed down to Jesus or

are you still maintaining the idea that you're the only King in town? That's where the parallel with Herod lies. You might be thinking to yourself

"Why would I bow down to Jesus? I don't need Jesus, I'm doing perfectly well without him."

Take a look at what ended up happening for Herod. In verse 19 we read that he dies. And history tells us that his Kingdom was split into three, a third going to three of his sons. One of his sons we read about in verse 22—Archelaus was his name—and he only lasted a few years until the Romans replaced him.

You can work so hard at maintaining your own rule, but in the end it's not something you can keep or even successfully pass on to your children; there is always the chance of someone or something that will outlast or outwit us. And even if we do better than most at holding on to what we have, death itself will have the final victory over us

Friends this is why we need imitate the Magi and bow down to Jesus. Jesus said that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and that he will raise them up at the last day. Keeping ourselves as king is a futile exercise, but bowing to Jesus as King is an act that is full of benefits. Bowing to Jesus as king means we will receive his mercy, it means he will forgive our sins, it means he will bring us the gift of eternal life.

Will you imitate the *wise* men and come before Jesus in worship? Worshiping Jesus is easy. It means coming before him in prayer and recognizing that he is the Lord of all things, it means giving up your own desire to be your own ruler, it means allowing him to call the shots through the Scriptures, and it means knowing that he is a gracious King and will forgive you for all the times when you have failed to worship him properly.

Will you come and worship the king now?