

# You Bethlehem are not least

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[0:00] Who rules at Christmas? It's the question I've been thinking about as I've come to this passage this week.

! It might feel like Amazon rules at Christmas. I don't know about you, but the last couple of weeks I've spent quite a bit of time on Amazon and quite a few times have Amazon come to Shaftesbury Road to deliver some people's Christmas presents.

I had a very, very, very quick Google search this morning, so it's probably not the most reliable thing. But apparently at Christmas time they make around \$3 to \$4 billion Amazon, which is extraordinary.

So maybe it feels like Amazon rule Christmas. What about these guys? They weren't ruling at Christmas last year, but they seem all being well.

They will be ruling at Christmas this year. Rishi Sunak and King Charles, maybe they rule at Christmas. Or maybe who really rules at Christmas?

[1:14] It's me. It's us, ourselves. We decide what we want to do. We make Christmas plans on our terms. We want people to buy what we want for Christmas.

We want to eat what we want to eat for Christmas. It's all about ourselves. Maybe we think we rule at Christmas time.

Well, this morning we're going to see that there is another ruler. Someone else who rules at Christmas time. Not just at Christmas time, but at all times.

And we're going to see what kind of ruler he is. And that's what, that's who, this prophecy in Micah 5 verse 2 particularly points to.

They're great words, aren't they? They're great words.

[2:24] They're read every year at carol services across the land, across the world. They're put on Christmas cards. There's songs about them. But the context isn't one of happy people wearing Christmas jumpers, drinking mulled wine, eating mince pies and opening Christmas gifts.

The context is one that's actually rather dark. Micah's context is one where there are prominent people who are in leadership positions.

Positions where they have rule and power and authority who are exploiting the poor and the weak in the society. It's a time where rulers try to make dodgy deals with other nations, trying to keep themselves safe rather than trusting in the Lord.

We saw that with King Ahaz a couple of weeks ago, if you were here, when we looked at Isaiah 7. And Micah is prophesying at a very similar time to Isaiah.

The rulers of the land, people in leadership positions, are not people who rule well.

[3:45] And they must be thinking, who is really in charge? If these people in our land are in charge, then there isn't really any hope. Just to help us to see a bit more context for where we are in the book of Micah.

Micah stands out as a kind of lone voice in talking about judgment. So in chapter 3 and verse 8, Micah says, But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, with justice and might, to declare Jacob his transgression to Israel his sin.

But the leaders that he particularly addresses are not listening. Her leaders, 3 verse 11, Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money.

They're making lots of money for prophesying. Apparently saying words from the Lord, but making lots of gain for themselves.

And yet they look for the Lord's support and say, Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us. They don't see the seriousness of their sin, which Micah points out to them.

[5:06] And so the end of chapter 3, verse 12 says, Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field.

Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill, a mound overgrown with thickets. Micah prophesies the word of the Lord.

Destruction is going to come because you are a wicked and sinful people. That's the context that Micah is in.

And yet as you read through the first half of chapter 4, you would see that God is going to restore things. There's a great vision of a future time where God will restore true and proper worship of him. God will save his people, but it will be through judgment. There is hope. There is joy coming. And God was going to do it through a ruler who was going to come.

[6:13] The ruler that we all need. And just a final little bit more of context for us. In chapter 4, as you read past that future vision of God restoring true and proper worship, you get to verse 9 and see the judgment that's about to come on God's people.

It says this in verse 9 and 10. Why do you now cry aloud? Have you no king? Has your ruler perished that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor?

Ride in agony, daughter Zion, like a woman in labor. For now you must leave the city to camp in the open field. Micah describes the judgment that's coming for God's people.

He describes it as like that of labor pains. And I want to make it very, very clear to you. I have no experience of what that is like. But from the very, very, very little I know, I believe it's very, very painful.

And that might be an understatement. And that's how Micah describes the judgment that's coming for God's people. It's going to be like labor pains. He says in verse 10, Ride in agony, daughter Zion, like a woman in labor.

[7:40] It's agony. The gospel is coming for God's people. Is God really in control of all this?

The kingdom seems to be coming to an end. And yet there were promises to David that his throne and kingdom would last forever. Is God really in control?

Is he really the ruler? But labor pains ordinarily don't last. And ordinarily a baby comes and there is joy at new life.

And for God's people, there is the assurance that these labor pains, that they will come to an end. And the Lord is going to redeem them. That's what we read towards the end of verse 10.

There you will go to Babylon. There you will be rescued. There the Lord will redeem you out of the hand of your enemies. The Lord will redeem.

[8:43] The Lord will come and save. But it will be through judgment. And then you read down through the rest of chapter 4 and see that many nations are gathering around Jerusalem.

They say, Let her be defiled. Let her eyes gloat over Zion. Nations thinking they've just defeated these people, God's people. But God says, They do not know the thoughts of the Lord.

They don't understand his plans. That he's actually gathered them like sheaves to the threshing floor. Judgment was going to come on the nations as well.

Like sheaves being trampled on in judgment. Judgment. But right now, for God's people, in Micah's day, judgment exile is about to come.

And this is what we read. 5 verse 1. Marshal your troops now, city of troops. For a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod.

[9:51] They're weak. They're fragile. Marshal your troops together. But they haven't got many troops to marshal together. A siege is laid against them. They're in a very weak and very vulnerable situation.

And it says, They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod. Can you imagine that? A king being struck on the cheek. A sense of shame in that. A smallness in that.

But then, in all of that, we get this promise. Which we're going to spend time in now. 5 verse 2. But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me.

One who will be a ruler over Israel. We're going to see three things in this prophecy. First of all, a promised ruler from a little town.

A promised ruler from a little town. Says verse 2, But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah. We often sing at Christmas time that little carol, O little town of Bethlehem.

[11:03] Little town was a bit of an overstatement. Bethlehem was tiny. It was probably more of a village in our eyes. 100, 150 people possibly living there.

It's small. It's described as small in this prophecy. Micah says that you are small among the clans of Judah. You are small. You are seemingly insignificant.

It would be extraordinary that anything much could come from there. It's not like the vibrant, bustling city that we live in, Brighton.

And I myself feel like I can connect with this. I don't come from Brighton. I come from a little village north of here called Hurstwood Point. Some of you may know exactly where that is.

Some of you will have driven through it. Some of you may have never even heard of Hurstwood Point and would need to get your map out. So here's a map for you. That's where it is.

[12:06] A tiny little place north of here. But a few weeks ago, apparently something extraordinary happened in Hurstwood Point. Would you believe?

Hurstwood Point Village Pizza Kitchen, our local pizza takeaway, got second place in the National Pizza Awards. Can you believe that?

From a little village called Hurstwood Point is the second best pizza in the country. It's extraordinary that anything good could come from a little tiny place, and yet it did.

And from Bethlehem? A little tiny place? Something extraordinary? A great ruler coming from this little town?

Well, that was the place God was choosing. To bring a great ruler who would bring a great rescue and restoration for his people.

[13:12] God is not going to forget his people, and he was choosing this little tiny town for his promises to be fulfilled. But remember, God's done this before for Bethlehem.

1 Samuel 17 verse 12 says this, Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah.

And do you know who David is? David is King David, who we read about in the Bible. He is from the little tiny town of Bethlehem.

And he was a great king over Israel. Out of all his big and strong and mighty brothers that could have been chosen, a humble shepherd boy from this humble little town called Bethlehem was chosen to lead God's people as king.

And it's to David that promises were made of an everlasting throne, of an offspring who would rise up and rule forever. Some of us were here last Sunday evening and thinking in great detail about that.

[14:36] But David didn't last as king. He died. He didn't sit on his throne forever. So we look to the next offspring of David, his son Solomon.

And the greatness of Solomon's kingdom was astounding. But soon his love for women and for wealth overtook his love for the Lord.

And Solomon wasn't, it turns out, the promised offspring who would rule on David's throne forever. And then after that, other kings came and fell.

And the kingdom was split into two. It was divided. And now in Micah's day, they're about to go into judgment, into exile. Was God's promises really ever going to work out?

Was God really a good king? See, there's a longing for another ruler, a better ruler to come and restore God's people.

[15:46] And this little verse in Micah points us to that ruler. And I guess this year, we've kind of all known what it's like to long for a better ruler.

It's been an unprecedented year where we've had three prime ministers and a change of monarch. We don't know how long it will be before another one comes.

Rulers come and rulers go. But you certainly don't expect them to come from obscurity. You don't expect the next king or queen of our country to be born and raised in Hurstford Point, a little known to anybody else.

No one royal births are announced. They're announced in the city, the big city of London. And outside Buckingham Palace goes this easel to announce the birth of a royal child who will grow up in a royal family.

They aren't born in some insignificant place to some insignificant people. But David was anointed king in this little place called Bethlehem and so would this promised ruler be born.

[17:07] And so it's going to come, I guess, there's no surprise to us who this ruler is. The New Testament clearly shows us who it is.

Micah 5 verse 2 is quoted for us in Matthew's Gospel. I'm going to turn there, you may like to as well, to the New Testament, to Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 2.

I'm going to read a few verses from that chapter. Matthew chapter 2 verse 1.

After Jesus was born in where? Bethlehem. In Judea. During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came from Jerusalem and asked, where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.

[18:18] When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. And it's in, you can call out again, it's in Bethlehem.

In Judea. Excellent. They replied, for this was what the prophet has written. 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 shepherd my people Israel. Israel. This promise of a ruler coming to be born in Bethlehem, it came to pass.

And we see that here in Matthew's gospel. The wise men, the Magi, they searched for him. They came to Herod, who was the king at the time, and tried to find out where this king was.

Born in a royal palace, was he? No, born in Bethlehem. And that prophecy, Micah 5, verse 2, was quoted.

[19:29] The king has come, the king, the promised ruler, has come. And the wise men, they came, they laid gifts before him, didn't they?

Gold was one of them, knowing, recognizing, this child was a king. The king comes, the promise is fulfilled.

He is the ruler of Christmas, and of all times. He is the ruler we need. Micah and God's people, they face a dark and difficult time, as judgment awaits them.

But God points them to certain hope, of the ruler who will come and stay. A ruler who will come and reign, on David's throne forever.

See, Christmas, it's not just about, a little baby's, a helpless baby's birth, but it's about a king who reigns, who is born, and is willing to come down, and even be in this small, and weak little village, in Bethlehem.

[20:45] To be among small, and weak people. Maybe we look to Christmas Day, and we look to that day, and hope that all our problems, might go away.

But no, we look, to the joy, of knowing a king. A king, who reigns on his throne. A throne, that will last forever.

Whatever we are going through, we can know, that he, is in control, and his promises, are being worked out, and are being fulfilled.

Secondly, a promised ruler, from of old, a promised ruler, from of old. Over the last couple of months, in beginning to work here, at the church, I've experienced, two people, come and do some work for us.

A plumber, and an electrician. And, I've had very little experience, of people, coming out to do work like that, but I've been learning, quite a bit, over recent days.

[21:58] both of them, are on a website, called Checker Trade, which I understand, helps us to, check the legitimacy, of people's work.

But also, one of them, was even recommended, personally to us. And that, that really does help, when you're recommended, people who are going to work for you, when you can know, that these

people, are trained, in what they're doing.

It helps us to know, their background, so that we can be assured, hopefully, we'll get the toilets fixed, or the electricians fixed. You do that background work, to make sure, that, things are going to be okay, hopefully.

And this, verse, it speaks to us, about the background, of this ruler. And it should be, very reassuring for us, as we look at this.

It's not just, some ruler, with no experience, at all. No, it's a ruler, who, it says, whose origins, are from old, from ancient, times.

[23:04] Shows us, this is a ruler, we can trust. Someone, we can look to. Someone, more than just, a little baby, in a small town.

He's from, of old, from ancient, times. Now, apparently, the phrase, from of old, I don't know Hebrew, but I'm reliably, informed, that, from of old, is used, a couple of other times, in the Hebrew, in the Bible.

And they both, refer to God. So, there's two verses, here for you. Habakkuk 1, verse 12, Lord, are you not, from everlasting? It's the same, same words, from of old, everlasting.

And, Isaiah 9, verse 6, which was preached, on last week, by David, everlasting, father. Both times, they refer to God, being everlasting, being eternal.

And so, when Micah says, from of old, from ancient times, he's, meaning, this ruler, is from eternity. And if he's from eternity, he is God.

[24:16] That's who this ruler is. And so, we can certainly trust him, for he is from eternity. The ruler is God, himself.

And he was going to come, to this little town, of Bethlehem. Come to people, who feel hopeless, who are going, through those, labor pains of judgment.

Who can barely, marshal together, a few troops, as the nations come. Whose current ruler, is going to be, struck on the cheek. But a ruler, is coming, whose origins, are from of old.

Who himself, is God. The ruler, is extraordinarily, born as a baby, and yet is ancient.

Mary carries, in her womb, someone who is, far older than her. Someone who's existed, before this world, was even made. is made, a child.

[25:27] And that we can hold on to, in what we experience. In our sickness, in our pain, in our house moves, in our family breakdowns, in whatever we are going through, in our lives.

We can hold on to the thought, that this promised ruler, that we really need, at Christmas time, and at all times, born in this small little town, of Bethlehem, is the ruler, who has existed, from before this world began.

He sees, and knows, all things, all of time, in his hands. There is no king, like this king.

This king, from of old, from of eternity. Matthew's gospel, chapter one, verse one, starts in this way. This is the genealogy, of Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

God has made promises, to David, that his throne, and line, will last. But in Micah's time, as exile comes, as the kingdom, seems to be destroyed, God was still, going to fulfill, the promises.

[26:46] Jesus. And Jesus, the New Testament, begins, by showing us, that he is, a direct descendant, of this king, David.

He is a legitimate heir, and he is the one, who's going to reign, on David's throne, forever. God still, keeps, his promises. Jesus. This week, the news has shared with us, some statistics, about Christianity, and, they, look and feel, a little bit discouraging, that Christians are, in the minority. Maybe, hasn't come to a surprise, to us, but, just seeing the, the numbers, and, seeing it confirmed, it feels sad. We live in a city, in a country, where, we are not, in the majority, where we may feel, a little small, and weak.

It's great, when we get to gather, all together here, like this, but, but when we're away, from here, on a Sunday, during the week, we may feel, rather small, and weak, and on our own.

And yet, Jesus, this one, from eternity, has come, in the flesh. And, he's made, great promises, to his church. He said, he will build, his church, and the gates, of Hades, will not overcome it.

[28:13] This is the one, who keeps his promises still. He is the one, who has promised, to be with us, to the very end, of the age. He is with us, by his spirit, as we go, into the world, to make disciples, of all nations.

He is at work, and he is building, his kingdom, and he still, keeps his promises. And he has come down, to be, with us.

The one, from of old, from ancient times, from eternity. There is no king, like this king. This king, born, in the little town, of Bethlehem, is from eternity, who has come, and is here, to stay.

He is the king, that we need, this Christmas, and at all times. Thirdly, and finally, we see the promised, shepherd king.

We are straying, down from verse 2, and into verse 4. I will read it, in a moment. But remember, where we are, in Micah's day, that the troops, are lined up, against God's people, that the ruler, it says, will be struck, on the cheek.

[29:34] But a promised ruler, is coming. And what kind of ruler, is he going to be? Because remember, in Micah's day, the rulers, were rather, corrupt, and exploitative.

They didn't really care, for other people. How can God's people, know safety, and security? Well, they can know it, in this ruler, who is coming, who is going to be, a shepherd.

It is not an image, of a ruler, that we would, particularly, be thinking of. A ruler, being in, dirty fields, managing, flocks of sheep.

But this ruler, is no ordinary ruler. He's an extraordinary king, with extraordinary origins. And he's going to be, one who will shepherd, people.

That's what we read, there in verse four. He will stand, and shepherd his flock, in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty, of the name of the Lord, his God.

[30:41] And they will live, securely. He's a shepherd, a shepherd king. One of the most famous psalms, in the Bible, is Psalm 23, which tells us, the Lord, is my shepherd, and it's written, by King David, the other king, from Bethlehem.

It's a familiar picture, in the Bible. But we find ourselves, in 21st century Brighton, and we don't really see, many shepherds about. But a shepherd, he, a shepherd is one, who looks after their sheep, they are his prize, and his joy.

They care for their sheep, they feed their sheep, they call their sheep, they lead their sheep, they protect their sheep. And I don't, don't think we would look, at our rulers today, and think that they are, shepherds of us, like that.

And yet we're told, here is a ruler, who's going to come, and he is going to, shepherd his people. And he comes in the majesty, and splendor of God, yet like a shepherd, out in fields, leading, looking after, his sheep.

That's how God chooses, to come down, and rule us. And shepherds, they provide security, for a vulnerable flock of sheep.

[32:13] And as God's people, were surrounded, by nations, coming to attack, that's going to be, so reassuring for them. A ruler is going to come. He's going to be a shepherd.

They'll be able to live, securely, in him. And that's the king. That's the king, who comes at Christmas.

That's the king, the ruler, we really need, at Christmas. John, chapter 10, Jesus, picks up, on this thought, of him being, the shepherds.

And, he speaks about, how he lays down, his life, for his sheep. And, there's some wonderful, words which speak, of the security, that his sheep, his people have, in knowing him.

John 10, 27, my sheep listen, to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.

[33:24] No one will snatch them, out of my hands. My father, who has given them, to me, is greater than all. No one, can snatch them, out of my hands.

I, and the father, are one. Our security, as Christmas comes, might be, found in, many other things. We might be, finding them in, in our plans, for Christmas. We might be, finding them, in, our family relationships, in a present, we're going to give to someone.

But actually, Jesus comes, as our shepherd king, and in him, no one can snatch us, from his hands. We live securely, in this king, this ruler, that we need, today, this Christmas, and always.

So, who rules, at Christmas? If it's Amazon, well, they probably don't care, too much for us, as long as we give them money.

[34:31] If it's King Charles, and Rishi Sunak, who do, rule, at Christmas, but, but if that's, who we're particularly, looking to, to lead us, then, then they probably don't, particularly know us, by name, and care for us, deeply and personally.

If we ourselves, if we, are ruling at Christmas, we make mistakes, we do wrong, we, sin. This passage, speaks of a ruler, who comes to save us, from ourselves, to save us, from our sin, and bring us, into life, forever.

No, the ruler, that we need, at Christmas, and always, is the Lord Jesus, who this passage, points us to. Some of us, are going through, some really hard things, this morning.

We, as a church, we share, one another's burdens. We've seen, this morning, the King. And we have the joy, even through, all that might be going on, in life, lives at the moment.

We have the joy, of lifting up our heads, to the throne, and seeing the one, who rules forever, who keeps his promises, who cares for us, so much, that he would come down, to this little, tiny town, of Bethlehem.

[36:01] And he is with us. He is the good shepherd king, who rules over us, and who will never, ever, let us go. That's the ruler, we need this Christmas, and every day.

We usually end, we usually, after a sermon, respond straight away, by singing, in song. But I thought it would be good, to end in just a slightly, different way.

We will sing together, in a moment. But first of all, we're going to, have a time, just to pause, pause, and to listen, to a song, being sung to us, on a video.

And it's a song, which picks up, on the promise, here, in Micah 5 verse 2. Use this time, however, would be helpful, just to, maybe just to listen, to the song, maybe to sit, and pray, and respond to God, from what we've heard, in his word.

And then we'll join in, together, to sing, a great carol, to close. So hopefully, this will all work.