

The first ever Christmas

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Preacher: Liz Price

[0 : 00] Hello. Well, it's really great to be here with you all tonight amidst all this amazing aromatic greenery. And in this very special hall, I don't know if you're aware, this hall has a remarkable history of being on Strictly Come Dancing.

So from Len Goodman to Anton Dubeck, many famous feet have trodden these boards. Now, I don't think there are any celebrities with us tonight, but I want to ask you guys the question. What's who's the most famous person you've ever met? Would you believe me if I told you that I had met the king? It was during a family holiday in 1982.

And my parents heard that Prince Charles was touring the area. The future king was nearby. So we cancelled the sightseeing plans and queued instead in the blazing sun.

And as the prince passed, my dad lifted us over the barrier and we ran straight past the security detail and up to Charles. It was a very brief encounter and it didn't remotely alter my life.

[1 : 05] Now, that's a true story. But I wonder what you'd say if I told you that I regularly meet the king of the whole world and he has changed my life. No, I'm not delusional and I haven't been overdoing the Prosecco tonight, although it is very nice.

I didn't meet him on a walkabout, but in the pages of Matthew's Gospel, which is an eyewitness historic account of Jesus, the king. And you can meet him there, too.

We're going to enter the narrative at chapter two at the bottom of page four of these small books in your goodie bag. Now, the story of the wise men will, I guess, be very familiar to many here from school nativities or maybe the nativity movie.

But please do follow along with me if you can, because as so often, the book is way better than the movie. So just read with me now, looking at the bottom of page four, verse two, chapter two.

Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

[2 : 17] For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. I wonder if you notice how Matthew's opening sets up a clash of kings.

Matthew presents two kings here, Herod versus Jesus. And he demonstrates that when you put them side by side, Jesus wins, because he's all about showing us that Jesus is God's global king.

And in this passage that we're going to look at, he gives us two kings, two signposts and two responses. Let's start with our two kings. Let's weigh up the contenders in our clash of kings.

So in the red corner, we've got King Herod and he swaggers in looking like a sure bet because he's the reigning king after all. See how Matthew carefully anchors these events in history.

We might say while Theresa May was PM, Matthew says while Herod was king. And Herod's history was well documented. He's a Roman puppet ruler over the conquered Jewish nation.

[3 : 21] A man so insecure about his position that he killed anyone he deemed a threat, including his wife and three of his sons. And the Emperor Augustus even quipped that it was safer to be Herod's pig than it was to be his offspring.

So he certainly got power. But does that make him an easy victor? Well, in the blue corner, we've got Jesus. And the sharp eyed amongst us might have spotted how he's introduced.

The wise men ask for he who has been born King of the Jews. So they at least apparently think there's another king contender. But how is that possible?

I mean, he's no longer a baby in a stable at this point, but he's still a little kid. The big surprise here, by the way, is who's not called king. I wonder if you've noticed. Yeah, it's not the wise men.

If we've only heard this story through school plays, we might see them as the three kings. Like the carol we've heard played tonight, I think. But actually, the Bible never labels them kings.

[4 : 23] It calls them wise men. They're important foreigners. And actually, we don't know if there were three, 23 or 103. People think there were three because there were three gifts. But who knows?

Maybe they clubbed together. So we can discount the wise men. But who wins our clash of kings? Matthew wants us to see that in this clash of kings, it's the toddler, Jesus, who emerges as king of the world.

Now, that's a crazy sound. But Matthew gives us some evidence. Firstly, this passage presents two cosmic signposts. And secondly, we're going to look at how other characters respond to him.

Two signposts, two responses. Our first signpost is the star. Look down with me at verse two. That's the small number two at the bottom of page four.

We saw his star, say the wise men. And in verse nine, halfway down the next page, Matthew says, The star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

[5 : 27] The star points to Jesus. Now, I love Christmas lights, a bit of sparkle and bling. But God's Christmas light was something else. He uses supernatural starlight to clearly mark the arrival of his promised world king.

It's like a big neon sign flashing king. And it's not the local establishment, but the guys from out of town, the wise men who are reading the cosmic room.

And they spot it. The second signpost is the fulfillment of the prophecy. In verse four, just at the top of page five, Herod asks his priests where the Christ is to be born.

Christ just means anointed one. It's another way of saying king. And the priests say they're expecting him. So look down at verse five. 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, or from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. The priests are quoting the prophet Micah, who lived about 700 years before.

[6 : 38] And Micah predicts the birth of a ruler in Bethlehem, precisely where Jesus was born. Jesus fulfills the prophecy about birthplace. And look, it's pretty difficult to choose where you're born and make that prophecy come true.

I mean, if I'd had the choice, I would not have been born in Essex. Because as a blonde Essex girl, I stepped into a matrix of expectations that I've spent the last however long trying to live down. But Jesus steps into a different matrix of huge expectations.

Micah foretells a shepherd king who will rule the people from every nation. He'll fix this messed up world and bring hope, even in the face of death.

Now, this might sound like a pipe dream. But if you read through Matthew, you'll see that Jesus delivers on that prophecy too. So two signposts, the star and the fulfilled prophecy.

Matthew goes on to sign, to showcase two different responses to Jesus. Let's start with how the wise men respond. So these foreign potentates are probably astronomers or scientists in today's terms.

[7 : 46] They come from the east after a long and perilous journey from their homeland. And in verse 11, we see their gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh. So they're learned and rich because these are costly gifts.

They're not losers in search of a crutch. What's driven them to leave their comfortable lives and risk their wealth in the desert? Well, verse 2 shows us.

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 their intention is clear. They've come to honour Jesus as a superior king, bigger than both themselves and Herod.

Their own rulers are left behind. They take a back seat. These guys are not even Jewish. The east is actually associated with Israel's enemies. But in Jesus, they see someone bigger than the national borders.

A global king, if you like. A high king. Their gifts are fit for royalty. Many of us may know the story of the wise men backwards. But have we ever considered what the point of it is?

[8 : 54] These erudite, wealthy men radically disrupt their lives because they see that something cataclysmic has happened. This child Jesus is God's promised king and they'll do anything to meet him.

Now, I don't know whether many of us here would call ourselves monarchists or not, but I'm pretty sure that none of us think that King Charles is worthy of worship. Yet in verse 11, after giving gifts, these men humbly worship Jesus.

They literally prostrate themselves on the ground. And statesmen don't tend to just bow down to toddlers routinely. First century culture wasn't soppy about children.

These are wise men. But their actions show that they recognise Jesus as king. And when they find Jesus, Matthew says in verse 10, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Now, I want you to imagine for a moment that you're an English teacher marking this phrase. And I reckon you'd probably cross out the repetition here. You know, rejoiced joy. That's a bit OTT. But that's just Matthew's point.

[9 : 59] The wise men's reaction to finding this child, Jesus, is massive, over the top joy. Because he's the king who offers hope for their messed up world. I think we all want joy at Christmas, don't we?

And I'm sure most of us long for a better world. A world without muggings on the school run or dying children or wars. And the evidence here points to Jesus as that world king who can deliver.

We've only looked at a few verses, but actually Matthew's full of this kind of evidence. Let's have a look at Herod's response. Look at verse 3. When Herod, the king, heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. Actually, Herod also believes in Jesus' kingship.

You see, he doesn't deny that a king has been born. He doesn't say, this is rubbish. Have you guys been smoking your own frankincense? Instead, he asks his priests where the king is.

[11 : 05] Herod, it says, is afraid. We might expect him to show unbelief or scorn because Jesus is a kid. But no, it's fear.

And there's no reason to be afraid of a kid unless you think he's more than just a kid. Herod knows that he's been a fake king and a bad king. And now the real deal has shown up.

So we can contrast these two responses to Jesus. Herod sees the signs and he's deeply disturbed.

And as the narrative progresses, then by the time we get to verse 13, he tries to destroy Jesus.

He literally wants to bury the evidence. He believes that Jesus is king, but he's afraid of the implications. Jesus threatens his status quo. So Herod rejects him.

I wonder if this lack of enthusiasm might resonate. It certainly does for me, because when I started to investigate Christianity at university, I remember being nervous. Life seemed good and change wasn't on my agenda.

[12 : 08] We might wonder if Jesus has something to offer, but also kind of want to brush it under the carpet. We all cherish our independence. And I totally get that. I mean, I'm a bullshit ethics girl.

But Matthew reassures us that Jesus is a safe, safe person to put in charge. Take a look back at Micah's words. He's a shepherd ruler and he can uniquely combine power with total care and kindness.

Earthly rulers will always fail us. It doesn't take long looking at the news headlines to work that out. They're self-seeking, but Jesus isn't. And actually, the wise men's gift list points ahead to Jesus' ultimate selfless love for his people.

Look again. Did you ever wonder why he's offered myrrh? Myrrh was used to embalm dead bodies. It's a very odd gift for a baby shower. Right at his birth, it heralds Jesus' death.

Because 30 years later, this toddler would go on to die on the cross. God's glorious world king would freely give his life in exchange for the life of anyone who would turn to him.

[13 : 19] Herod was a rebel. I was a rebel. We're all rebels. But there's a way back for rebels like us. So I know it's a very busy season. You've all got to do lists as long as your arms.

But can I gently urge, if you don't yet know Jesus, then do consider the wise men. Check out the evidence in Matthew and seek him. Feel free to come quiz me afterwards.

Meeting the king of England was a total non-event. But meeting King Jesus in person is something that I can honestly say helps me daily. So if a friend from Grace Church invited you, why not ask them what it's like to know the king of the world personally?

See what they come up with. Sorry, guys. Three decades ago, I sought Jesus and I found joy because he's a king who really does bring hope to a messy world, even in the face of death.

And I find him in the pages of the eyewitness historic accounts of the Bible. And I can honestly say he's not let me down.