

(3) Spoken by the prophets

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is from Matthew chapter 2, and that's on page 974. Matthew chapter 2, and we're going to be reading from verses 1 to 12.

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 he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. 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. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, are by no means least among the rulers of Judea.

For from you shall come a ruler, who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

[1 : 12] 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 too may come and worship him.

After listening to the king, they went on their way, and behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh, and being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Thanks very much, Simon, for reading for us. We're continuing our series in Matthew, in these opening chapters of Matthew's Gospel, which we started a couple of weeks ago.

[2 : 20] And today's passage is slightly different from the one which you'll have seen in the sermon card. We're actually just going to look at these first 12 verses today, and then verses 13 to 24 in our all-age service on Christmas Day.

Now, several years ago, the Guardian newspaper ran an advert with the strap line, Get the Bigger Picture, you may remember it. It was an advert made up of two photographs, and the first of the photographs showed a lone woman standing on the pavement in what looked like an isolated street.

She was clearly unaware of the fact, that immediately behind her, there was a roughly dressed man, who looked as if he was about to mug her. Well, you had to turn the page to get the second picture.

At which point you realise, that far from being about to mug the woman, actually the man was about to push her out of the way, from a heavy load, which was falling, about to fall on top of her, in the building above.

His intention was not to mug her, but to spare her serious injury. The point? Get the Bigger Picture. Well, that is precisely what Matthew is doing for us in these early chapters of his Gospel.

[3 : 36] He wants us to see the significance of the birth of Jesus Christ in the context of God's overall plan for his world. So, three weeks ago, when we started this series, we looked at Jesus' family tree in Matthew 1, verses 1-17.

We saw that Jesus is the son of Abraham, who will bring blessing to all the nations. We saw, too, that he is the son of David, God's king who will rule forever.

And then if you were here last week for our carol service, we saw, didn't we, those two names that were given to Jesus. We saw that this was no ordinary birth. This is rather God himself come to earth.

God himself come to rescue, to bring the forgiveness of sins to those who trust him. Well, now in chapter 2, verses 1-12, Matthew sticks with the big picture as he continues to record the events of Jesus' birth, but he does so in order to show for us the true significance of what was going on that first Christmas.

Which doesn't mean, of course, that Matthew isn't writing history. No, these are real events. But he's not kind of writing what we might call random memoirs. He doesn't just kind of throw everything that he can remember Jesus doing and saying into his account of Jesus' life.

[4 : 59] Rather in common with the other Gospel writers, Matthew deliberately selects what he's going to include. Which means, of course, that we always need to ask the question, as we look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we always need to ask the why question.

Why is it that Matthew, of all the things that he could have chosen, of all the things he could have selected, why does he recall these particular events for us? And I think it's fairly clear why he records verses 1 to 12 of Matthew chapter 2.

It's because he wants to make two deliberate contrasts. And you'll see them there on the outline of today's talk on the back of the service sheet. So we're going to look at these two contrasts together. And then, as usual at Grace Church, we'll have a question time. So if anyone has a question they want to ask, do store it up for the end. First of all, a contrast between two kings.

Have a look at verses 1 and 2 with me. 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 he who has been born king of the Jews?

[6 : 18] For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. Now I wonder if you can see the very deliberate contrast that Matthew makes for us there between these two kings.

Between, on the one hand, in verse 1, we have King Herod, the puppet king installed by the Roman emperor. And on the other hand, we have Jesus, the new king in verse 2, born king of the Jews. So yes, verse 1, these events take place during the reign of King Herod, but verse 2, there's another king as well. Now notice that, as we look at these wise men, notice that contrary to the Christmas card myth, that they are not necessarily kings.

Notice we are not told there were three of them, and unlike one carol, nor are we told their names. It's always important, isn't it, to distinguish the real events of Christmas, as we have them here in the Bible, from the kind of myths that have grown up around Christmas.

Now these men were astrologers from the east, probably from a country like Iran. They had spent all their time studying the stars, looking for special events. This was a common thing in the ancient world.

[7 : 38] So for instance, when the Roman emperor Nero became emperor, wise men came to pay him homage as the new king, as the new emperor. And notice too, that just because Matthew includes the story of the wise men, it doesn't mean, of course, that he thinks that star-watching and telling the future from the stars is a good thing to do.

In fact, as a Jew, he would have known that God condemns all form of telling the future from the stars, or any sort of magic based on the stars, which of course is why Christians don't have anything to do with horoscopes.

But what they can tell, these wise men, is that a king has been born, and so they set off and they go to the place where they rightly assume a new king might be found.

They go to Jerusalem, the capital, and they go and see Herod in his palace. And perhaps you can imagine as they go to Herod, as they see his wealth, as they see his opulence, as they see his power, as they see his influence, no doubt they think to themselves, well, surely here is the place where this new king has been born.

And so they ask us too, don't they, where is he who has been born, king of the Jews? Notice, not he who will become king, but the one who is already king at his birth.

[9 : 10] And of course, to their great surprise, he's not there, because the true king is not Herod, but the baby Jesus. And Matthew deliberately selects this visit to the wise men to show that precisely what the Old Testament writers had said would happen when this king came, has indeed happened.

So turn back with me to Psalm 72. I put it there on the outline, Psalm 72, page 581. Now this is one of a number of passages in the Old Testament where God says that his king will come.

Page 581. We can see that Psalm 72 from verse 1 is a prayer for a king. Give the king your justice, O God.

And verse 2, it's a prayer that the king will rule rightly and justly. But as we read on, I think it becomes clear that this is no ordinary king that this is a prayer for.

So turn over the page to verse 5, where we see that this king who's going to come is an everlasting king. May they fear you while the sun endures, which I take it is forever, and as long as the moon throughout all generations.

[10:35] He's an everlasting king. But notice in verse 8, he's a king who rules everything. May he have dominion from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.

Notice in verse 9, we see the nations coming to him. We see in verses 9 to 11, verse 11, the kings falling before him as representatives of the nations, serving him.

We see in verse 17, all nations will be blessed through him. May people be blessed in him. All nations call him blessed.

So here then is a prayer for a king who will rule forever. He'll rule over everything. He'll be worshipped by the nations.

One who will bring blessing to the nations. But of course, as we work our way through the Old Testament, it becomes fairly apparent that that promise, the expectation, wasn't fulfilled by any of the kings in the Old Testament because of their sin.

[11:47] But of course, the expectation is still there. So 200 years after Psalm 72 was written, Isaiah the prophet spoke again of this expected king.

He pictured representatives from the nations coming to this king. I put Isaiah 60 there on the outline. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.

They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall bring good news the praises of the Lord. And then later on, the prophet Micah wrote that this king would be born in Bethlehem.

And it's from the prophet Micah that Matthew quotes in Matthew 2 verse 6. 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. Now, as many of you know, we used to, we lived in the East End before moving to Dulwich.

[12:54] And one of the events that took place every year through the streets of the East End was the London Marathon. And the build-up to it in the kind of weeks up to the London Marathon was always absolutely terrific.

So weeks beforehand, street signs went up explaining precisely which roads would be closed.

Several days beforehand, bollards and railings would arrive and be set up all the way along the route just to keep spectators in place.

The night before, streets would be closed. And then on the day itself, early in the morning, people would gather in all the sort of strategic locations along the route making sure they got the very best view.

Waiting in eager expectation of seeing the first runners. there was an enormous sense of expectation kind of built up over weeks beforehand. But then, of course, in a moment, those first runners arrived and the waiting was over.

Well, how much greater, perhaps we can imagine, was the anticipation for hundreds of years before Jesus arrived. The expectation that God would send his everlasting King who would be worshipped by people from the nations.

[14:08] And Matthew's point is that now that has arrived, these wise men are the first of what will be multitudes from the nations coming to worship Jesus in due time, even from countries as obscure as England or Belgium.

So then, here is the contrast between two kings. One is true, the other false. And I guess that often our problem is that we are blinded to reality.

We see the leaders of this world as they hold sway, as they look powerful, as they so often cause chaos and make misery for the lives of millions.

And as we see that, it's easy, isn't it, to think that our world is out of control. It's easy, perhaps, even to think that God is weak, that God is powerless. It's easy to forget that such men are answerable to a higher authority.

Their reign is temporary, their power is finite. One day, they will have to face the king whose rule is eternal, who rules over every nation.

[15 : 25] And it seems to me it's particularly important that Christians grasp this because Matthew wrote his Gospel to help Christians to stand firm in a hostile world.

Matthew's first readers were under pressure from a hostile Roman regime and a hostile Jewish establishment. They needed courage to stand firm for Jesus in a difficult world where the future seemed very uncertain.

They needed confidence to proclaim Jesus to the nations. It's why Matthew's Gospel ends with a great commission. As the risen Jesus says to his disciples, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. Now, in the Roman Empire of the first century, those words would have been explosive. In a culture where there were many so-called truths, in a culture where there were many so-called gods, here is the bold affirmation that there is one truth and one God.

So let me ask, because it seems to me we often talk about Jesus being king, but let me ask, what do we mean when we talk about Jesus being king?

[16 : 47] I sometimes wonder, perhaps, we're in danger of losing this universal understanding of Jesus as king. Perhaps often we're content to let it rest that yes, Jesus is our king.

Now, of course, that's nice and tolerant and we're obeying what the world tells us, which is that we mustn't pass judgment on anyone else's views. But, of course, the Jesus of the Bible won't let it rest there.

He wishes that the whole world acknowledge his rule and what he's done for us. So then, a contrast between two kings.

But secondly, a contrast between three responses. Now, as we look at these responses, Matthew wants us to understand that these are the responses which the news of the arrival of God's king will always generate, just as much in the 21st century as in the 1st century.

But he also wants us to ask the question, well, how am I personally responding to the arrival of God's king? There are three responses. You'll see them there on the outline.

[17 : 55] First of all, the response of outright hostility. Have a look with me at verse 3. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

Now, I take it that Herod is rightly threatened and rightly troubled. And notice that although in verse 8 he tells the wise man, doesn't he, to let him know where Jesus is, where this newborn king is, so that he can worship him, I take it his real motives are far more sinister.

Have a look on to verse 13 where Joseph is told, rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you that Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him. Herod was a puppet king, he was put on the throne by the Roman Empire, by the Roman Emperor and by all accounts his reign was brutal. But in opposing Jesus, Herod is taking on far more than he realises.

Have a look at verse 12 again. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Now we mustn't jump to the conclusion that God usually talks to people in dreams any more that we might jump to the conclusion that a virgin conception is the normal way in which children are conceived.

[19 : 24] But notice rather in verse 12 that here is the living God who is ensuring that his newborn king is protected and the plans of King Herod are thwarted.

What a warning it is to those like Herod who seek to take Jesus on because they will not win.

Indeed, when the baby Jesus grew up he demonstrated that he was indeed Lord and God.

And supremely the resurrection of Jesus from the dead shows that Jesus is God's appointed king for the final day. Now I take it that we see exactly the same reaction of hostility to Jesus all around us.

I guess many of us will know people like that. So remember that it happened to Jesus first. Don't be surprised when people fiercely reject the gospel when they fiercely reject the rule of King Jesus as Herod did.

Don't be surprised when people fiercely reject you the messenger of Jesus. Don't be intimidated when the powerful and the influential and the articulate oppose Jesus and his rule.

[20 : 41] And remember that Jesus is the real king of his world. But it may be that you will actually like a Herod yourself. Well surely here is the appeal to remember who the real king is in this world.

it is Jesus. And on the judgment day Herod will stand before King Jesus and bow the knee before him. Not in rejoicing but in begrudging realization that Jesus is indeed king.

So the response of outright hostility. But notice too a second response. The response of cold-hearted apathy. I wonder if you noticed that response in verses 4-6 as Herod assembles what is effectively the religious establishment in Jerusalem he gathers them together and he asks them where the Christ where the king is born.

And we can see their response very strikingly I think by the fact that actually it's not reported by Matthew. Which is an odd thing to say isn't it but what is it that the chief priests and the teachers of the law do when they hear that this king has been born in Bethlehem?

Do they get the first express camel to go and see him? No, what are we told? Nothing. Precisely nothing.

[22 : 13] It's extraordinary isn't it? These are the guys who know all the answers. They know Psalm 72 they know Isaiah chapter 60 they know Micah chapter 5 yet in their response they are apathetic and cold hearted.

And Matthew's silence of course is his biggest indictment against them. They're the top religious officials surely they should have been the first to go and see the newborn baby and to knock on the front door of Mary and Joseph's house.

Surely they should have been the ones carrying expensive presents to this newborn king. But instead they do nothing. And it's that same cold hearted apathy that many of us will have seen around us this Christmas and will continue to see.

As we live in a culture which at one level of course knows the facts or thinks it knows the facts about Christmas and the coming of Jesus perhaps less now than in the past yet a culture which when challenged to investigate those facts refuses to do so.

Or perhaps as we spend time with friends and family who at one level may be perfectly happy to come along to a carol service or something like that as a way of getting into the Christmas spirit. But actually when challenged to investigate when challenged to take the person of Jesus seriously they back away cold hearted and apathetic.

[23 : 41] But of course it's at this point that I take it that you and I who would claim to be Christians need to be the most careful.

Because verses 4 to 6 show us don't they that it's possible for us to know our Bibles backwards as they did and yet actually to have a heart that is as cold as stone.

It's possible to look the keenest of the keen as they did but to be the coldest of the cold. Now isn't that a very striking thought?

It certainly got me thinking in the last week or so. So let's make sure that each of us examines our own hearts this Christmas. Are you genuinely in love with your Saviour?

Or are you cold and apathetic? Outright hostility, cold hearted apathy, thirdly, whole hearted rejoicing.

[24 : 44] And have a look at verses 10 and 11 with me. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. What is the reaction of these pagan astrologers? They rejoice.

They rejoice exceedingly, verse 10, with great joy. And notice that they give their very best to Jesus as they offer gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Now it may well be that Matthew sees a deliberate echo here of a previous king, of King Solomon, who was visited by the Queen of Sheba a thousand years earlier, and she too brought expensive gifts worthy of a great king.

But now, of course, a far greater king has arrived. And clearly, these aren't the sort of gifts, are you? You could have brought in a Jerusalem branch of Tesco. Now, these are seriously wealthy gifts.

[25 : 52] They were the kind of gifts you'd only bring to a king. They don't do things by halves as they give their gold and frankincense and myrrh. They give their very best.

And I take it that's what it means to be wholehearted in our rejoicing in Jesus. It means to give our very best to him. But just imagine this scene for a moment.

Might these wise men not have felt just a tiny bit foolish as they bowed down to a baby? I've just met Emma Wales this morning.

She looks absolutely delightful. I'm sure she is given her pedigree. But I feel very foolish bowing down towards her in worship.

But of course in reality these wise men are the wise ones aren't they? Because this is God's king who has come for the nations.

[26 : 58] And it's what we see throughout history. So often it's those who look foolish in the eyes of the world who bring their very best to Jesus. So don't despair.

Friends, family, colleagues may well sneer as we give our best to Jesus. The best of your time, the best of your gifts, the best of your abilities.

But in God's book as we do that we are being truly wise. Well, why don't we pray together and then we've got time for questions.

If anyone has some questions, let's pray. For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for the Lord Jesus Christ, that he is your true king, the one who will reign forever, the one who will be worshipped by the nations.

[28 : 01] Thank you that we can see what those wise men haven't yet experienced. Many, many from the nations flocking to recognise Jesus as king.

And we're sorry, Heavenly Father, when our own response is not one of wholehearted rejoicing and exceedingly great joy. And we pray, therefore, that this Christmas, as we remember again those events of the first Christmas, that we would be those who would rejoice greatly, that we would be those who would give of our very best to King Jesus.

And we ask it for his name's sake. Amen.