

Lord of the Kings

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[0 : 00] A few years ago, whilst doing postgraduate study, I was also teaching at a university in England, teaching religious studies.

And in one of the examinations that I saw and had to be involved in marking, one of the questions requiring just a brief answer was, who was Herod the Great?

And I remember one answer was very brief. A powerful man who won many battles. Well, they might as well have been describing Napoleon or Nelson.

That was all their answer was. Who was Herod the Great? Well, he certainly was a powerful man. He ruled Palestine and Israel for approximately 35 years, leading up to the time just after Jesus was born.

Probably he died around about 4 BC. He was a great palace builder. And all around Israel today, you'll see the ruins, spectacular ruins, of amazing palaces, fortresses, harbors, and other buildings that he built.

[1 : 09] He was quite a megalomaniac, in fact. He loved power and trying to keep and extend his power. But he was never fully acceptable to the Jews.

Though he had Jewish ancestry, it wasn't pure. He was half-Idymian, people of Edomite origin. And so he longed to be truly the king of the Jews.

That was the title that he sought most of all. It was why he extended the whole Temple Mount site in Jerusalem, to try and curry favour with the Jews. But he never truly was accepted by them.

So paranoid was he about his power that he killed several of his sons, including a couple while he himself was dying and one of his wives. And in fact, so brutal was he that the saying was around in his lifetime that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son.

So no wonder he's scared when these wise men or magi or perhaps three kings arrive and tell him that they've come to pay homage to a king, the king of the Jews, who's been born.

[2 : 18] And later, beyond our reading from Matthew, when he kills the little babies in Bethlehem up to the age of two, probably a vastly excessive act. But it fits his character from what is known of him in history through many sources.

Indeed, through these verses of Matthew chapter 2, the idea of king is a dominant theme. Herod, we're told, is called king to start with, to set the contrast with the next verse 2.

These wise men ask, where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? Now earlier this year, another Mary in a royal family gave birth to a son in Denmark, although she's Australian.

And one day, possibly, probably perhaps, that boy will become the king of Denmark. But when he was born, he was not king, but a prince.

And years ago, when Prince William was born, he might one day later be king of England, but he wasn't born king, born prince. Likewise for his brother.

[3 : 31] You see, here, we're told from these wise men, they're looking for the one who is born king of the Jews. That's a unique claim. Not one who's born to become later on the king of the Jews.

Not one who's born prince, but will one day inherit the crown and become king. One who's born already king of the Jews. Jesus, no else. That's an astonishing claim.

And what a contrast to Herod, who is grasping to win the Jewish acceptance to become, in their eyes, king of the Jews. But keeps falling short of the mark.

Jesus is born king already. Because he's already king before he's a human being. He's the king of heaven. Who's come to earth still king. King of all.

King of the Jews. The contrast goes a bit further in a way. Herod is in Jerusalem at the time. No doubt in his lavish palace in Jerusalem, near the Jaffa Gate, as it's called today.

[4 : 36] Where is Jesus? Not in a palace, but in a stable down the road, a few miles away, in that tinpot little area called Bethlehem.

It's like Herod in his palace in Doncaster, sort of turning up his nose at the little boys born in that little tinpot suburb down the road, like Kew, for example.

You see, Bethlehem was an insignificant town. A tiny village, really, in the time when Jesus was born.

Its only claim to fame was that that's where David had been born a thousand years before. It's a bit like Boweral in that respect. Boweral is inconsequential, except that the great Don Bradman was born there.

So, that's Bethlehem. It's five miles south of Jerusalem. It costs about two shekels on the number 22 Arab bus from Jerusalem if you go there today.

[5 : 34] It's not a particularly good bus. It's not a particularly good town. These days you've got to get through a wall, a border crossing, and it's not particularly safe these days.

But what a contrast. Herod in Jerusalem in his lavish palace. Jesus in the scum of a stable, just a few miles south, but in a little tinpot town.

That, to be honest, other than David and Jesus, would not be known by anyone in this world today, except for those births. Herod grasping for power.

Jesus born with the full power and authority as King of the universe. Herod full of fear and hate.

Jesus born the perfect one of love.

Herod who's proud and vainglorious. Jesus who's always humble and meek. Herod who kills others and for himself is terribly afraid of dying.

[6 : 38] That's why he built so many palaces, so that he could escape having to be killed somewhere under a coup. Yet Jesus, who goes deliberately with full foreknowledge, without fear, to die, so that others may live.

Jesus dies with the title on the cross above him, King of the Jews. King at birth. King at death.

King before birth. King after death. Herod may have been great. In history he's called Herod the Great. But far, far greater, both in character and in rule, is Jesus the King.

King. And yet there's a sense in which Herod, for all his brutality and sinfulness, for all his pride and greed, lies not that far from us.

For our world keeps questing for power, grasping for power, lusting for it, for prestige and honour and glory from human applause.

[7 : 48] That was Herod. That was Herod. And it marks much of our world. The seduction of worldly power is tragic folly. In contrast, Jesus, humble, meek, selfless, loving, giving.

He's the example to follow. There's also a contrast between Herod the King and the three Magi, wise men, kings, whatever you know from your tradition, who come to him.

They come from the east, from outside Jewish territory. Tradition has it from Persia, maybe Arabia, maybe some say even as far east as India. Tradition has it that there are three.

That's only because they gave three gifts. There might have been many. In fact, I counted up this afternoon and on my shelves and mantelpiece I've got 54 kings at the moment. They're growing in multiples of three.

You won't be surprised to know. I've yet to find a Christmas card that's got more than three kings.

Maybe we need to design it. And they come sometime after Jesus' birth. An old tradition has it that they come on the equivalent of January the 6th, 12 days later.

[9 : 03] They might have come even up to two years later. By this stage, Jesus is called a child and he's in a house, perhaps rather than a stable. And Herod kills all the babies up to the age of two that may suggest that Jesus is approaching two.

It may just reflect the brutality and excessive carnage that Herod wrought. And they come with expensive gifts, very expensive gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh.

They come with costly gifts. Because they, though great, pay homage to him. In quite a clear contrast to King Herod in Jerusalem.

See, Herod couldn't even lift a sandal and jump on the 22 bus or camel or whatever it was in his day. But these wise men have travelled an excessive distance from a far country to come and give costly gifts and pay homage and worship.

Not just a sort of, you know, like an Australia sending a gift to Denmark when Mary gives birth to her child. Whatever the gift was. Was it a tram or something like that? I mean, really? Can't we find any

gold or frankincense in there?

[10:11] But the point is not just the expense of the gifts, but they worship him. They pay homage to him. They acknowledge that this little baby is king.

Their king. Not just the king of the Jews, but the king of them, non-Jews, Gentiles they're called as well. And what stops Herod worshipping Jesus?

It's not his ignorance. He knows more than they do. In fact, about him. From the Old Testament quotes and prophecies and so on. What stops Herod paying homage to Jesus?

Is his sin, his pride, his greed, his lust for power, his selfishness. It's the same today. What stops people worshipping Jesus and submitting to him?

Is their own desire to be in control. To be king of their own life, at least, if not others. That's what stops people from trusting Jesus.

[11:16] Is it stopping you? Have you submitted and paid homage to Jesus Christ? Jesus is described in verse 2 of Matthew 2 as king of the Jews.

Jesus is king of all. But at the end of this little section in Matthew 2, he's worshipped by non-Jews. Jesus is king of all. Jesus is king of all. Jesus is king of all. Jesus is king of all. Jesus is king of all. Jesus is king of all. And he's lord of the kings.

The three kings, King Herod and any other king. And that's a truth that we need to grasp hold of again today, it seems, even in our country. Lunik, the great cartoonist in The Age the other day, put it like this.

Behold, a saviour is born who is of Middle Eastern appearance. You see, Jesus is king of all. He's not a white Anglo-Saxon.

He was born in Palestine of Middle Eastern appearance. But he's lord of all and king of all. And there is no place then for any hint of racism when we come to Jesus Christ.

[12:27] And Christians above all people should live by that example in our country today. But more than that, there's no place for power quests when we come and submit to Jesus.

We're no longer in competition with our neighbour, but to love them and serve them. This story of Herod and the wise men who come to Jesus paints a contrast between them.

And it sets then an option for us to be like Herod or to be like the wise men. Don't be a Herod, keeping hold of your sin and thus preventing yourself from paying homage to Jesus.

But rather we're to be like the wise men. For wise people still seek Jesus and pay homage to him with their lives.

Let's pray. God our Father, make us more like Jesus, we pray. Humble, lowly, selfless.

[13:36] And make us like those wise men. Wise for salvation. By submitting to Jesus our King. The King of all. The King of the universe.

And we thank you dear God. That he came. Born as King. For our sakes. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.