

The Arrival of the King without whom it is just not Christmas

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[0 : 00] We try to fool the kids, don't we, and say, look, Christmas is not about the presents. It's about all those other things. But when I was young, it just wasn't Christmas until I received my grandmother's gift, tropical pajamas.

Every year she would give me tropical pajamas. Now, I've never been to the tropics, but if I ever do go, I've got 20 years worth of PJs. So no worries there. And guess what? The Bible agrees with me.

The Bible agrees with me. Not about the, obviously not the PJs, but the Old Testament readings we heard. They were all looking forward to the arrival of God's gift, his present to the world, a baby.

The New Testament readings we had, the Magi, they brought this baby presents and gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It seems that without presents, or at least this one present, this baby, the baby Jesus, it just isn't Christmas.

But here's the thing. For Melbourne, Jesus is the last thing they want. In this city, everything else is a Christmas must-have except for him.

[1 : 09] And as a minister of a church, that really bothers me, as you imagine. And I've checked my Bibles, you see. Just look on the screen. These are some of the names that Jesus was given in our third reading.

This is how the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, that means God's anointed king, came about. A few verses later, she will give birth to a son. You are to give him the name Jesus, which means God saves.

Why? Because he will save his people from their sins. And then a few verses later, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Thanks, Tina. And so it seems sort of outrageous to me that Jesus gets relegated at Christmas or any other time of the year. King, Saviour, and God.

But then I read Matthew's Gospel. And getting rid of Jesus is an entirely appropriate response.

[2 : 12] Getting rid of Jesus is a completely appropriate reaction. You see, as a baby, Jesus is very divisive. People either love him or hate him.

And Matthew has constructed his eyewitness account to show two very strong but opposite reactions to Jesus. That's why I printed the verses on your screen.

You can see the claims about Jesus, and we'll see two strong and opposite responses to him. Matthew shows us the wise men, the magi. They love Jesus.

A Christmas card from, if you know any magi, I don't think you do, but if you do get a Christmas card from the magi, it'll be a card with the nativity scene. They'll be in the background doing a selfie, and it'll have something really cheesy on the top, like the reason for the season.

And then Matthew shows us King Herod. King Herod tried to kill Jesus at Christmastime. A card from Herod would be something really generic, like reindeer and a tree, and it'll have that awful happy holidays on the top.

[3 : 16] And Matthew presents these two very different responses to Jesus as the only appropriate Christmas reactions. You see, if we all say that we love Christmas, which most of Melbourne do, Matthew wants to ask whether we've really understood it or not.

And so what we're going to do is have a look at the two reactions. So let me start reading from chapter 2, it was our fourth reading, chapter 2, verse 1. Let's have a look at Herod. So after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, notice you get a precise time and a precise location.

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, where is the one who's been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose, and we've come to worship him. We just sang that carol, We Three Kings, but the Bible doesn't actually say they were kings.

It says they were magi. It's where we get the word magician. They were mysterious pagan astrologers from the east, from Babylon. Notice Matthew doesn't mention three kings, but he does mention two kings.

And that is the problem. You see, there's Herod, the king, he's on the throne, but there is another king, the baby Jesus. Imagine the Magi, they come to Jerusalem asking, where is the one who's been born King of the Jews?

[4 : 39] Herod probably thought, King of the Jews? They're probably asking after me. However, sorry, Herod. The king we're looking for is about this big, he's about this wide. He comes in nappies because he's just been born.

It's a shocking way for Herod to find out that he's just been made redundant. Verse three tells us that when he heard this news, he was disturbed.

You see, he knew what the Magi were talking about. The king, the king of the Jews, God's Messiah, his anointed ruler. But Herod being Herod, he won't give up his throne so easily, so he needs more certainty.

So verse four, when he called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, so all the religious experts, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. The religious leaders, they go to Google and their Old Testaments and they start quoting a prophecy in verse five.

In Bethlehem in Judea, they say, that's the place, for this is what the prophet has written. And they begin to quote Micah, which was our second reading. Micah was written 750 years before the events.

[5 : 50] They predict the exact tiny town where God's king was to arrive. Only God could arrange something like that over eight centuries. And there's a slide on the screen.

This is what the prophecy says. 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.

Thanks, Tina. See, Herod is now certain this baby is the one. He has to find him. Luckily for Herod, Bethlehem is only five kilometers from Jerusalem. And in verse eight, Herod seems to have the right response.

He says, go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship. You see, when the Messiah arrives, a good steward should step aside.

Whoever is, whoever's been keeping Israel's throne warm should exit quickly when the true king arrives. And if you're suspicious of Herod, then God shares your cynicism.

[6 : 53] In verse 12, God warns the Magi in a dream not to go back to Herod. And in verse 16, we get to see just exactly what sort of shepherd Herod turns out to be.

Verse 16, when Herod realized that he'd 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'd learned from the Magi.

Herod implements a gruesome safety measure, not just Bethlehem, but all around the outskirts. He finds out the time when the baby was born so he can get rid of everyone two years old and under.

It is tragic stuff. You see, Herod hates Jesus because he knows exactly who he is. He doesn't give the order because he thinks Jesus is just another baby.

He believes the Bible's claim. He believes the religious experts and the Magi that Jesus is the king, the king. You see, Herod already has a king.

[7 : 57] He doesn't think he needs a savior. He's disturbed by the idea that God could be with us. He's an old man. He'll be dead soon, we're told. He hasn't had an heir in a long time.

And his plan with the Magi, the killing of the babies, that's his last attempt to stop God taking away his authority. And I guess there have been countless Herods down through the ages, insecure, weak, pathetic, sneaky, inflicting terrible damage.

This is one of the reasons why we need a king from God. And so Herod hates Jesus. He wants nothing to do with him. He tries to kill him off from his life.

And that is an appropriate response. He may be barbaric, but at least Herod is consistent. Herod is not unique. He is universal.

When you read the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, most people Jesus meets tries to kill him because this baby has come to remove us all from our personal thrones, just as surely as he's come to remove Herod from his.

[9 : 08] And therefore, killing Jesus off from your life is a perfectly understandable reaction, given the claims about his identity. You see, we're so offended by Jesus as a king.

None of us want to step aside as good stewards should. All of us, me included, we all want to hold on to our personal thrones. We all want to stop God taking away our authority.

We want to run our little kingdoms the way Herod did. The Bible calls that sin. We're so offended by Jesus as a saviour. None of us think we need saving.

Saving from what? We're not as bad as Herod. We're certainly not as bad as the person next door. And no one has the right to say we're wrong in our culture, much less sinful.

Perhaps the idea of God with us sounds perhaps a little bit bearable at Christmas, but all year round, in every decision we make, no, thank you. And that is what makes the real Jesus so divisive.

[10 : 16] Nowhere in the Bible is Jesus a moderate or just another in a long line of religious leaders or just some sort of teacher with a few pearls of wisdom on life.

Matthew says that Jesus was called Emmanuel, God with us. If you read through Matthew's account, the only explanation for the things Jesus can do, the things he says, the reactions people have to him is that he is God with us.

C.S. Lewis, the famous author, he says, Christianity, if false, is of no importance. And if true, is of infinite importance.

The only thing it cannot be is moderately important. You see, anyone who thinks Jesus is a nice sort of folksy person isn't talking about the real Jesus or the real Christmas, in fact.

And Matthew agrees. And he structured his account to move people out of the middle ground to either a reaction of hating Jesus like Herod, wanting to kill him off, or loving him.

[11 : 25] And this is the second response. Let's have a look at this. This is the Magi. Let me read from verse 10, chapter 2, verse 10. When the Magi saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw this child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

You see, the Magi love Jesus. They love him. They've travelled months and months to find him. Their affections were not sort of the grudging submission to a tyrant.

That's all Herod could ask for. Verse 10 says they were overjoyed. And unlike Herod, this is the right response to God's king.

We're told that they bowed down and worshipped him. The word used here for worship means to prostrate yourself, to bend over, to fall down with your face in the dirt.

[12 : 20] A response you would only give to God or a king. My daughter Penelope, she was born this year, accidentally at home on the doorstep. That's true.

My mum was the first person through the door about a minute after Penelope was born. No mysterious Magi from Babylon turned up that day. I'm a bit disappointed. No one came to worship. The ambulance arrived a few minutes later.

They didn't come with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. They came with rubber gloves and the medical kit, whatever they have. Google tells me that gold is worth \$47,000 a kilo.

It's expensive stuff. Historians tell us that frankincense and myrrh in those days was worth just as much. These are gifts for a king. And the contrast between the Magi and Herod couldn't be greater.

The Magi are foreign, pagan, stargazers. They're into astrology and magic. They hear that God is sending a king. They rush across empires to fall face down in the dirt to worship him.

[13 : 29] They love Jesus. They're not even Jewish. While the Bible reading court of God's people tried to kill him.

And Matthew has woven these two people together, these two responses together as the only appropriate ones when you meet the real Jesus face to face. Matthew includes Old Testament prophecies that were written to sinful Israel.

Israel. They were facing God's judgment. They tell us that God judges his people by abandoning them, breaking up with them, divorcing them, and exiling them to Babylon because of their sin.

And the Magi know all about it because they're from Babylon. They've heard all about it. And they know that Jesus' birth, Jesus' birth means an end end to hostility with God, even for pagan magicians like them.

Matthew's idea here is just as God judges Israel's sin with exile, that is just a picture of the judgment we face when we meet God and get his opinion on our lives.

[14 : 43] And I realize that that's really heavy stuff for a sunny Christmas summer service. But remember that Jesus' birth means rescue, time to come in from the cold, time to be friends with God and not enemies.

Jesus' own name, it means he will save people from their sins. And Matthew gives us clues as to how this will happen. The clues are the three presents from the Magi.

So gold, gold for a king, frankincense or incense for a priestly offering and myrrh for embalming a corpse.

You see, God's king will be a sacrificial offering for his people for their sins and they will wrap him and embalm him in myrrh like a corpse.

He will be a shepherd totally unlike Herod. His life for mine, his death for mine, his life for my guilt, my guilt which deserves God's just judgment.

[15 : 50] Read to the end of any gospel account, see how the death of Jesus dominates the narrative. You see, that is the tragedy of Herod. Herod sees Jesus as a threat when really Jesus has come to rescue, to pay for the sins of his people, even if they are monsters like Herod or pagan foreign magi or me or people like you to bring us peace with God and not the judgment we deserve.

And that is the real reason why Christmas is good news of great joy for all people. That's why peace on earth is such a theme at Christmas time. This birth is the beginning of rescue.

And again, Matthew wants to move people who are not bothered either way to either love or hate. Verse 3 says that when all the people of Jerusalem heard this, they were all troubled.

Maybe that is your reaction. Please ask the person who brought you here today. We've just lost someone. That's alright.

No worries. Crisis over. There you go. See that? It's a Christmas miracle.

[17 : 12] Look at that. Fantastic. All good. Verse 3 says that when all the people of Jerusalem heard this news, they were troubled. And maybe you're troubled by some of the things that we've said today.

Maybe that's your reaction. Please ask the person who brought you here today what Jesus has done in their lives and who Jesus is to that person. We would love you to join us over Christmas.

Naomi, when she comes up, will tell you a little bit more about that. But more than that, we'd love you to come here every week. Every week we meet here at 10.30 on a Sunday. You would be so welcome here.

In the start of the new year, we're going to be going through John's gospel. We're going to look at Jesus' life again. And I'm sure people like you get invited to loads of different things, to parties and to barbecues and to dinner and things like that.

Let me invite you to church. Would you do that? Would you come to church? I don't know when the last time you were invited to church is, but why not come to church? We would love to have you. But for now, Matthew shows us the real Jesus, God's King, God's Saviour, God with us.

[18 : 21] And he asks, do you love him like the Magi or do you hate him like Herod? She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

So I'm going to pray. Father God, we thank you that you would bother to send your son, your king, to save people like us, even monsters like Herod.

And Father, please move us to love Jesus. Please, over this Christmas period, show us who the real Jesus is. And we pray, Father, that we would not be just in the middle ground.

Please would we see him. Please would we be saved by him. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.