

The Ruler from Bethlehem

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[0 : 00] Okay, so with those verses open in front of us, here's a question for this morning. In the 21st century, will we fight against Jesus or will we fall before him and worship him?

So Matthew 2 is a really famous Christmas passage. There's the Magi and Bethlehem, there's the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, but it's not a soft focus story. It's not a gentle nativity story for kids. There is a threat of violence here from a man in a city who will fight Jesus.

And at the same time, there are others who come to him and basically surrender their whole lives to him. Okay, here's the first thing that happens. See if I can find my clicker somewhere.

Well, that will do. Here's the first thing that happens in this story with these verses open in front of us.

Jesus disturbs. He disturbs people. So verse 1 starts off, do you see, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. So that's the first mention of Bethlehem in Matthew's Gospel.

[1 : 17] It rings bell. He was born in Bethlehem. So we are going to act this out. So Bethlehem is over here. Jerusalem is over here. Mary, do you think you might come out? Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary, out you come.

So Mary's going to come and sit here in Bethlehem. And the baby is born to her.

It's just mentioned casually in passing, actually, in Matthew 2. But you're meant to remember what the prophecy had said. And Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod. Now, we need to meet Herod. Where is Herod? Out you come. Herod, not from Bethlehem. Herod is in Jerusalem. Out you come, Herod. Come and sit on your throne here with your sword.

Now, at this point in history, Matthew 2, the Roman Empire had installed Herod the Great as the king in Judea. And Herod, you've got to know, JJ looks nice, but Herod was a brutal ruler.

[2 : 27] He was rich. He was clever. No smiling. He was paranoid. And he was nasty. And under Herod's reign, any threat to his power was dealt with immediately.

He was a despot. His close contacts, rivals from his own family, had been made to disappear for good. This happened in the first century. And Jesus was born in Bethlehem under King Herod's regime.

Okay, that's what went on. And at that time, verse 1, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem. So, we need our star who's going to go that way and round.

And anybody who is already a wise man, do you want to get up and follow along behind him? So, Magi came from the east and they came to Jerusalem.

That's it. A bit quicker. It's a long journey. The star moves at the star's pace. So, in they come to Jerusalem. And the star comes to stop here.

[3 : 31] And the wise men come up and come and meet Herod. So, yeah, stand up, star. So, these wise men, there we are, either side of King Herod.

They're astrologers. They are book readers. And they're searching for the truth. They're looking for signs that God will act. And they arrive in Jerusalem after an epic journey.

And they say to King Herod, where is the one who is born King of the Jews? We saw his star where it rose. And we've come to worship him. And did you notice the reaction in verse 3? When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed.

And all Jerusalem with him. So, Herod was stirred up. He was troubled. He was agitated. Like you stick a wooden spoon in washing up water and you stir it violently.

Hearing that the king of the Jews had been born, King Herod, secular ruler and despot, immediately agitated. But not just him, all of Jerusalem with him.

[4 : 30] So, imagine the chief priests and the teachers of the law, the capital city dwelling elite, all of them. The city as a whole, they're disturbed. They're rattled by the news that something has

happened.

Because Jesus has been born. And somehow, Jesus being born disturbs people. Why? I think Herod is not stupid.

Herod gets the force of what the Magi say. They come, they say, where is the one to be born King of the Jews? We have come to worship him. And King of the Jews is language, really, for the promised ruler.

For the Messiah, for the king that will come. There were old words spoken in the Old Testament that said, Well, may he rule from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.

And may the desert tribes bow before him and his enemies lick the dust. May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him. And the kings of Sheba and Seba present him with gifts.

[5 : 35] May all kings bow down to him and all nations serve him. That's the claim about the baby to be born. He will come into the world as king.

He'll be enthroned by God in his world as king of kings and lord of lords. Before whom secular rulers and cities and individuals are meant to bow in glad worship.

And I think Herod, the king, gets that. And it shakes him up. Herod, the true king has just arrived. There is a higher throne than yours.

Will you worship him? It's the same thing that disturbs Jerusalem. It is the same thing that will disturb any person today who sets themselves up as king and centre of their own world.

I will do what I want and other people should serve me. And as he comes into the world the first Christmas, Jesus disturbs. Forgive the flowery language.

[6 : 35] This is Eugene Peterson, an American pastor. The kingdom of self is heavily defended territory. Human beings are willing to pay their respects to God, but they don't want him invading their turf.

Most sin, far from being just a lapse in morals or a weak will, is an energetically, expensively erected defence against God.

So first thing, Jesus comes into the world. He invades our turf, if you like, and news of him reaches Jerusalem and his coming disturbs.

Understandably. What happens next? Notice verses 4 to 6 next. This one who disturbs.

He is the Messiah. He is God's long-promised king. King Herod, this is what despots do, he hears the Magi's question, where is this king? And he acts quickly.

[7 : 37] He calls a high-level meeting. And so he gets together the people's chief priests and the teachers of the law. So I think we've got a couple of them, have we? Charlotte, you're a chief priest. And Laura as well, sorry.

Do you want to come together and bring what you've got in your hand? Yep, you come together. Yeah, come on round. You're being called by Herod. So if you come and stand here, just behind me, next to Akira.

Yep, up you come, onto the stage. So the chief priests and the teachers of the law arrive. And basically the king says to them, where is the Messiah to be born?

And he wants to know. Because faced with a threat, he will track Jesus down. He wants to locate and destroy. Where will I find him, he asks, with steel in his eyes.

And the chief priests and the teachers of the law, they know. Of course they do. And they get out the old scroll. Do you want to open it up? It is the scroll of Micah from 701 before Jesus.

[8 : 43] And they say in Bethlehem in Judea. Because that's what the prophet wrote. Do you want to read it out to us loudly, Charlotte? This is what the prophet has written.

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, are by no means least among the rulers of Judea. For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

That's it. That's Micah chapter 5. 700 years before the birth of Jesus. And a little bit of 2 Samuel as well. It is such a clear, specific prophecy.

Within the drama, Herod, all he needs is the location. Locate and destroy Bethlehem. But don't miss what Matthew, the Gospel writer, wants us to say. Matthew is all about fulfilment.

Matthew is a Gospel written particularly for Jewish people. How wonderful ancient promises are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. At the end of chapter 1, the drama surrounds Mary, the mother of Jesus, because she's a virgin.

[9 : 49] Verse 22. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive, give birth to a son. They will call him Emmanuel, God with us. God's long-promised

ruler would be born of a virgin.

And he was. The promised manner of his birth. And now, from Micah, the promised place of his birth. He was born in Bethlehem in Judea. Verse 1.

Where is the Messiah to be born? Verse 4. Verse 5. In Bethlehem in Judea. Because this is what it was written in the prophets. You, Bethlehem. Three times. So do you see what we're being shown here?

The ancient promises, clear, specific promises, publicly known promises about the ruler who will rise and shepherd, whose greatness will reach to the ends of the earth, are being fulfilled in Jesus undeniably.

So for all of us here and all of us here, it is so important to know that. And our world today at the 21st century is full of strong opinions and many religions and lots of spirituality.

[10:57] And Jesus has one option among many, which can leave you feeling a bit wavery and unsure about the Christian faith. Sometimes even committed Christians find ourselves secretly wondering if what we say we believe is really true, or are we just imagining religious stuff in our heads to make us feel better together?

It really matters. Because following Jesus isn't a part-time hobby on the side, it's the whole of your life. And how terrible, what a waste, if actually I'm following some made-up rubbish about him. But Matthew 1 and 2 are so clear. Born of a virgin, it's miraculous. Born in Bethlehem, a small insignificant town. As predicted, as promised, he comes.

Fulfilling God's promises in history. You can have absolute, sure confidence about who Jesus is. Do you see that? Regardless of my feelings about him, regardless of what other people say about Christianity, he is the ruler, the Messiah sent by God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

One, Jesus disturbs. Two, he is the Messiah. Thirdly, just very straightforwardly in the story here. Worship him.

[12:15] You're meant to worship him. So come back to the drama. Are you ready? In verse 7. Herod, disturbed and threatened, he has the information he needs.

And so very cunningly, he closes in on this king of the Jews. Well done, wise man. That was good. So Herod, chief priest, you could just stand here a moment.

Herod called the Magi secretly. He found out from them the exact time that the star had appeared. He's saying, how old is this child I'm looking for? I want more information to narrow down my hunt. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, go and search carefully for the child. You be my eyes and my ears. You be my spies. And as soon as you find him, report him to me so that I too may go and worship him.

Do you think Herod wants to worship him? He does not. The full horror of Herod becomes clearer later in this chapter as he gives orders to slaughter every two-year-old and under boy in Bethlehem.

[13:23] It's an absolute atrocity in history. I will not have Jesus invade my life. I will not bow down to him. I will do anything I can to get him away from me.

But now in the drama, Herod fades into the background. And we travel with the Magi to the one they've been searching for. So let's do that. Chief priest, thank you.

You can go and sit back down. Star, do you want to lead them to Bethlehem? So you go out that way. You're the star. Come straight through the middle here probably. And wise men, no, you don't fade into the background.

You stay there, Herod. That's great. Off you go that way. Not so quickly. You're going to go that way. Off you. Down. Jump down. Right. Right. Off they go. And so the star went ahead.

Chief priest, you could probably go and sit back down if you like. Well, you can follow around if you want. Not quite what happened in the story. That's okay. Okay. So they come round.

[14:25] And as they're coming along, just pause here for a moment. Don't get stressed by the star, by the way. It sounds very, very unscientific, the star that led ahead.

But I want to say, if there is a God who created the heavens and the earth with a word, and if there is a God who enables a virgin to have a baby, he is more than able to do something like this with a sign in the sky.

Do you not think? And so the star that they had seen when it rose went ahead of them. Keep going. Until it stopped over the place where the child was.

So if you hop on, hop on star and go around the back of Mary. Yep. It's very hard with those arms. Yep. Round to the back. Keep going and turn around.

And wise men, you probably want to stay there. There we go. So when they saw the star rising over the place where the child was, somehow the very house itself, these magi, verse 10, they were overjoyed.

[15:29] Do you see that in the text? Literally, they rejoiced with great joy exceedingly. They couldn't contain themselves. They were totally thrilled to bits. Because finally, they were about to come face to face with the Messiah himself, with God in the flesh, before them.

Like, can you imagine that? And on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. And if you can get behind the nativity scene that you've seen so often, this beautiful scene here, really, it captures for us how our maker would have us relate to his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you see the scene? If Herod over here fights against Jesus, I will not have you anywhere near my life. Then the magi here, they freely and joyfully fall before him.

And they bend over, and they bow down in adoration and submission and worship. And then they open their treasures, and they present it to him with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Are you set, Magi? Well done. Bend down. And you offer your gifts. Give them to Mary, if you'd like. The gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And really, they're saying that all we have, these luxurious gifts, fit for a king, we lay them before you.

[16:54] Again, I kind of ask, can you picture that? Not gritted surrender to a brutal ruler. Not a casual relationship with Jesus, my spiritual helper, that I drift in and out of.

Rather, in this moment, just a whole life freely given over to his service. And that's Matthew 2. This is the good news of the first Christmas.

This is the wonderful promise of Micah chapter 5, fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. In his coming, Jesus disturbs. He really is the Messiah.

Worship him. Let me just ask, as I draw to a close, what do you make of that? As you sit here this morning and hear it for the first time or the thousandth time. Herod and Jerusalem can't stand Jesus, really.

Won't have him as king. Push him to the edges of life. Try to get rid of him. And the Magi from the east fall before Jesus in glad submission. And the thing is, for us today, two thousand years later, we know so much more than these Magi here.

[18:04] They'd heard of him. They'd read prophecies, maybe. Only just laid eyes on him, this king of the Jews, born of a virgin in Jerusalem. Today, we know of Jesus' life. His kingly character made plain in the Gospels.

His compassion and wisdom. His tender care for people living under the shadow of death. Today, we've heard of Jesus' invitation. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Today, we know of Jesus' death. Like what self-control and mercy towards us as this baby grows up and allows himself to be crucified in Jerusalem by those who hate him.

And the notice over the top says this is Jesus, the king of the Jews, because it was. And we know today of Jesus' resurrection as he destroys death and rises to reign as Lord of all.

We know all those things. Thank you. And we also know of Jesus' work through history and today, as his greatness reaches to the ends of the earth, which is what Micah 5 had said.

[19:15] Because right now, today, and over the past 2,000 years, Jesus has been building his church in every nation. He's been building communities of people around the world who submit to Jesus Christ and are slowly being changed into the likeness of this gentle servant king.

We know all of that today. So here's my question. It's a question, really, for every human being this Christmas. Every secular ruler, every despot, every city, every family, every individual.

This is our choice. Will you fight him? Will you fight the Messiah? Or will you copy the Magi and fall before him and worship him? Not gritted teeth surrender, not casual relationship with Christian things.

Rather, Lord Jesus Christ, we turn from the kingdom of self and we fall before you in adoration and submission. You are our king and all we have is yours.

And the truth is, as we do that, as you become a worshipper of the Lord Jesus Christ, like the Magi themselves, you will start to discover joy, a kind of deep-rooted, life-changing joy.

[20:33] Because he is the Messiah and he is good. And in serving him and worshipping him today, this king who loves us, we find our rightful place in God's world and we will live securely

through life and through death and on into eternity.

And Jesus disturbs. You should be disturbed by him. He is the Messiah. He is the Messiah. Would you worship him this Christmas? Well, thank you very much to all of you for acting so wonderfully. I think right at the very end, maybe with your parents, we might have a photo and gather you all together. But for now, we are going to sing. We're going to sing our next carol. And as we do that, thank you to all of you on stage.

You can go and sit back down and then we're going to sing. So as the music starts, we'll stand and sing. Thank you very much.