

Very Different Kings

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 January 2002

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] St. John's Shaughnessy Church St. John's Shaughnessy Church St. John's

There's a distinct lack of self-assurance and self-confidence in those who make predictions and prognostications about the future.

It seems like last year has knocked the self-confidence out of the industry. And it's as though they look but they cannot see and for the first time in as long as I can remember, they're willing to admit that they can't see.

And instead of predictions, what we've had this last week are longings, lists of hopes and longings. Tom Shippey wrote a book on J.R.R. Tolkien and he reckons that one of the reasons for the well-deserved popularity of the Lord of the Rings is because most of the central characters spend most of the book bewildered.

They're lost. And their doubts and their decisions and the way that they should go is not known to them.

[2 : 3 6] They're caught up in large events of great significance but they're lost in the wild. And that is made clearer to us because they spend so much time in forests. What forests do, of course, is they cut off your line of sight so that you lose your bearings.

And I wonder if that's one of the reasons why the film is so popular right now. I think it's a perfect picture of where we are at the beginning of 2002. What do we do with our bewilderment and our longings?

Or better still, what does it mean that Christ Jesus has come? What does it mean for our bewilderment and our longings? And in this most wonderful episode of the coming of the Magi in Matthew 2, we are given two different contrasts which teach us what to do.

And the first contrast is between wise men from the East and wise men in Jerusalem. Just look at verses 1 and 2 again.

We read, When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, which is a word that Matthew uses to say, Look, look, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem saying, Where is he who is born, king of the Jews?

[4 : 0 2] We've seen a star in the East and we have come to worship him. You'll know that Matthew chapter 1 finished with the announcement of the angel that the child to be born is God with us.

He has come to save his people from their sins. And the very last verse, the Virgin Mary, gives birth to Jesus. And now without fanfare and without so much as an introduction, wise men appear in Jerusalem.

They've never been referred to before in the Bible. They'll never be referred to again in the Bible.

And what makes matters worse, they come just because of a star. I know you're a very smart, wise and intelligent congregation, but I need to clear up a couple of misconceptions about these wise men.

Most of us learn our theology from Christmas cards. They're not wise men. They're not kings. We don't know if there's three of them and we don't know their names.

I just hope you're not disappointed to hear that, but that's the truth. The word is magi. They are magi, which is a coverall term for philosophers, astronomers, astrologists, magicians, men of dignity and wealth.

[5 : 1 1] And there are a couple of historical references to magi outside the Bible, but we still don't know where they come from. In verse 1, when Matthew says they come from the east, the word east isn't there.

Literally, they come from the rising, from the rising of the sun. And I take it, Matthew is saying, they come from beyond the known world. If they'd come from Babylon or from Persia, Matthew would

have told us.

I think what we are reading here is it's quite possible they came from way further east, possibly central Asia. They may have come from Afghanistan or even China.

But wherever they were from or whatever it was that God had revealed to them, they cover a vast distance for one purpose. They've come to worship and adore this child-born king of the Jews. We're very used to the gospel emphasis on the plain poverty into which Jesus was born, feed trough. But we also need to be clear that there are two very important witnesses in the birth narratives of Jesus that identify this child as the majestic son of God and the universal saviour and lord.

[6 : 25] The first witnesses are the angels and the second are the magi. And you see, the angels show us that there is not one spiritual being in the universe who is unaffected by the birth of this child, Jesus.

And the magi show us that there is not one single human being who is unaffected by the birth of Jesus Christ. The arrival of the magi announces to us the majesty, the universality of this child, that this child is not born just into the history of Israel, but he is born to every human being.

And nature itself cannot help but bear witness. A star bears witness, appears and leads the magi all the way to Bethlehem wanting us to know this child is born not to be king, but he is born king. This is the one who stands above the forest, the one who is sent by God, as the angel said, as saviour and king. Some people say that Christianity is a western religion, that Jesus is a western baby in its origin.

Nothing could be further from the truth. You see, Jesus' majesty shines in the east. The majesty of Jesus was known in the east way before it was known even in Jerusalem.

[7 : 46] And the simple reason is that God wants us to see that this baby Jesus is not just the saviour of the Jews, he's saviour of the world. And the magi are the first Gentile believers in Jesus Christ.

They are fulfilment of Psalm 72 that was read to us a few moments ago. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who created the world is the God and Father who will bring this world to judgement.

And when he sends his Son into the world to live and to die and to rise, he does not just send him to be Lord of Christians or Lord and Saviour of the Jews.

He sends him to be Saviour and Lord of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, those with no religion, whatever. It is not just Christians who must turn to him and call on him for salvation but men and women and boys and girls from every tribe and every nation.

It's not a matter of religious preference, it's a matter of whom God has appointed Lord and Saviour. And that is where the magi are our guide. When they say they've come to worship him they haven't come to do some private religious exercise so that they can adorn our Christmas cards.

[9 : 02] They recognise in the birth of this child something of worldwide importance. They don't know the Old Testament, they don't know the intricacies of the incarnation but they know that something is taking place in the birth of this child.

Something so extraordinary it draws them beyond the boundaries of their culture and their country and even their religion to worship Jesus as the rightful Lord and King even of the East. But what a contrast they are to the wise men in Jerusalem.

Look down at verse three and four please. Herod heard it, he was troubled, all Jerusalem was troubled. If Herod is troubled, Jerusalem is troubled. Assembling the chief priests and scribes of the people he inquires where Christ is to be born and they tell him.

They go straight to the chapter and verse. They say, yes, King Herod. Yes, he will be born in Bethlehem of this we are confident.

It's quite possible they had heard the report of shepherds, maybe even of angels. Rather than bestirring themselves and walking a couple of kilometres down the road to sea, they hold fast to just being troubled.

[10 : 13] They like their bewilderment, they like their distress. They want to stay within the confines of the forest. They know so much. The truth is so close.

But instead of looking for their redeemer, they settle for being disturbed. That is what the birth of Jesus Christ does for us. It disturbs our equilibrium. If equilibrium is your goal, Christ will remain a stranger to you and ultimately he will become your enemy.

He has not come to bring personal balance and well-being. He has come to bring a kingdom and a kingdom that spreads by salvation from sin and seeking him always means change and it always means acknowledging him as king.

And so we read down in verse 9 after they leave Herod, the wise men go and see the star and it takes them right to Bethlehem and they rejoice exceedingly with great joy. verse 11, they go in, they see the child and they fall down and worship him and offer him gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh. See there are two things happening. It's not just they rejoice with great joy exceeding. I think the shocking fact is that they are the only ones who go from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

[11:35] Not one priest, not one scribe could be bothered. Even though they had heard the rumours of angels, they had met the Magi, they knew the prophecy, they told the prophecy to the Magi, yet the Magi go alone.

They could have gone outside at night and looked up at the star themselves and I think it must have amazed the Magi. They had travelled who knows how far for this.

They had found the words of the sacred scripture of the Jewish people. Bear witness to this. And yet the very ones to whom Jesus is born cannot inconvenience themselves enough to worship him. I think it's a stinging rebuke to us. It's often those closest to the glory of Jesus Christ who are most blind to his glory. The long familiarity with the good news of Jesus Christ does not always bring us to the joy of worship.

It can lead to a spiritual lethargy a casualness where we take him for granted. But there is a second contrast.

[12:47] Not the contrast between the wise men from the east and the wise men from Jerusalem. This is a contrast between two very different kings. You need to know that Herod was quite the guy.

Brilliant, ruthless, and in all his official autobiographies a great athlete. I discovered this week that he married into the family of the Hasmoneans, the priests, the high priests, and when he discovered that his father-in-law was plotting against him he killed his father-in-law and then killed his wife and then a few years later killed her children.

He was ruthless, but he was a builder and he was the one that built Masada out in the desert and the reason he built Masada out in the desert was because Cleopatra, who was married to Antony, wanted his head and he knew he needed a fortress.

So he very wisely built a second fortress in Jerusalem and named it after Antony. He also built a palace in Jerusalem. He also built a harbour in Caesarea named it after Caesar.

He knew how to name buildings and he rebuilt the temple. But when the Magi come to him and ask to worship the king, Herod is troubled and things get worse when he calls the chief priests and he says to them where is he going to be born?

[14:13] Because they say to him in verse 5, 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 govern my people Israel.

You see, Herod has good reason to be troubled. He'd spend his life building his power and wealth. He now had a kingdom to leave to his heirs. He had enough prosperity and success to scoff at Old Testament prophecy.

But this was different. And it's not just the arrival of the Magi that alarm him. It's the combination of the arrival of the Magi and the words of the Old Testament prophecy.

Suddenly, the predictions that he had written off as remote and harmless faith statements, you know, the stuff for the emotionally weak, suddenly from nowhere they present a challenge to his well-constructed sovereignty.

And he realizes deep in his heart that he is ruling in competition and in opposition to God's Messiah. You know, that is exactly how God breaks into the life of a proud person.

[15:29] You work hard to have it all together and you plan. The plan is in place and all is going well and you're almost recession-proof. You've got something to leave to your heirs. And you may have had the luxury of writing off the words of Scripture as remote and harmless faith statements.

And then God does something which threatens everything. You realize that the words of Scripture are not just harmless words, but behind the words stands the one who challenges your carefully constructed sovereignty.

And the fragility of the world that you've built becomes apparent to you and you realize that you're trying to rule in opposition and in competition to God's Messiah. For many years it had cost Herod

exactly nothing to pay lip service to God's Messiah.

So long as it costs us nothing to believe in Jesus, we don't really know him as God's Messiah. When Christ comes, he comes as king. And when he comes as king, it always brings conflict. Christ will always be in conflict with our covetousness and our greed and our ambition and our hypocrisy and our deceit. But what makes it so much worse for Herod the king is that these very words from the Old Testament expose him.

[16:50] They expose him for being the frightened and brutal bully that he really is. For when the words say from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people, the word govern is the word for a shepherd who will feed.

The kind of rule that God's Messiah is going to bring is one of nurture and care and feeding. The way that Jesus as God's Messiah rules us is through his word.

He feeds us through his word. The primary way he cares for us is through his word. That is why when we stop feeling that he cares for us, we usually do so because we neglect his word.

Couldn't get a sharper contrast between two kings. Here is one whose rule is cruel and temporary and here is a shepherd who cares whose rule is eternal.

Here is one who rules his people by brute force. Here is one who comes to rescue his people. Here is a ruler who is not afraid to slaughter children and here is another who allows himself to be slaughtered for the children of God.

[17:59] Here is one who hides from God's words because of his insecurity and here is another who brings security to us by bringing us God's word.

See, Herod tries to cover his bewilderment. He tries to push his longings down and you can see it in increasing desperation. He does not dare give the impression he is troubled or uneasy.

He might have to begin to see the truth of God's promise and stupidly he decides to fight against God by secrecy. And when he takes that step he has closed himself off from God's Messiah.

And I think the question for us today as we begin this new year is what do we do with our bewilderment and our longings? Herod denies it that the Magi bring their bewilderment and longing all the way to the feet of Jesus Christ and they give to Jesus all that they have and they fall down and they worship and what they discover when they've done that is that they thought the king whom they thought they were seeking they realize has come seeking them.

I think it's the only place we can bring our bewilderment and longings. Christ is the only one who stands above the forest. He is the beginning and the end. He is the Alpha and the Omega.

[19:31] He is the one who has come from God seeking us to be our shepherd. And I close with these words from him ten chapters later he says to each of us come to me all who labor and are heavy laden that I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

This digital audio file along with many others is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohnschaughnessy.org On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. quality news and we'll get started to hear and this will be available by getting started and pausing on a ten- gezeit and I willik thank you very much for the test to be received and we can see that before we see that it's done in Kathryn and there's almost what means that me call a conversion