

Mixed Expectations: Herod and the Magi

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- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 2, you'll find that right at the front of the New Testament, page 807. Matthew chapter 2, that was read so well for us by those two kids this morning, I thought.
- And this is a very familiar passage if you've been a Christian for a while. And the thing about Matthew 2 that takes a lot of getting used to is that the chapter is all wrong.
- Everything seems upside down. The wrong people come and worship Jesus and they come the wrong way using astrology.
- The people who should be most thrilled to welcome Jesus do absolutely nothing. Jesus himself does absolutely nothing.
- Yeah, he couldn't be more vulnerable or dependent. Nine times in Matthew 2, he's just called the child. In parallel with nine times Herod, who is the king.
- [1 : 1 2] The king of Israel, whose job it is to lead and serve and care for Israel, massacres all the male children two years and under in the region of Bethlehem in the attempt to exterminate Jesus.
- And the child Jesus escapes with his family by being taken to North Africa, where he lives as a child as a refugee.
- Like 65 million people this year in the world right now, Jesus and his family knew what it was to be forcibly displaced to another country and face the reality of refugee life.
- Something to think about. Chapter 2 is so different from chapter 1. I mean, chapter 1, the angels make it clear that this child is human saviour, divine Lord, God with us.
- And everything at the end of chapter 1 seems touched with heaven and hope. And all the good promises of God seem to be coming together and coalescing on this child.
- [2 : 1 5] And if you look down at the last verse in chapter 1, Jesus is born. That's it. He's born in the last verse of chapter 1. And our hopes are high. And then we hit chapter 2.
- And if it weren't for the wise men, there would be no joy at all in this chapter. But even the wise men bring us problems. As I said, they find Jesus by following star charts, astrology, which is strictly forbidden for the people of God.
- And yet here they are. And if they had not come to Jerusalem seeking Jesus, there would be no massacre of the children. It all seems wrong. And then we stand back and we look at the text, chapter 2, and there are two things that shine out of the text.
- I'm not talking about the star. There's two things that shine out of the text. One is God is acting everywhere and in everything, even in those things that seem to be wrong. Four times we're told that God quietly directs the characters by sending an angel who appears and speaks to them in a dream.
- And four times we are told that what is happening is explicitly to fulfill what God promised in the Old Testament, that God is working through this wrong chapter and these upside-down events.

[3 : 31] And even those who are most bitterly and viciously opposed to Jesus are somehow fulfilling God's purposes and promises centuries before, not like puppets, but showing who Jesus is by their very response to him.

That's one thing that shines. And the other thing that becomes very clear through the chapter is that though he is just a child, Jesus is the axis around which everything happens.

That's the point. By sending his son into the world, God makes Jesus the axis on which the world depends. All the work of God, all the promises of God circle around the person of Jesus Christ.

God places his son in the world and he calls us to worship the son as the delightful children's focus told us. Where is that girl? Why is she not in the congregation? I want her.

And as you look at it closely, Matthew offers us a choice. The choice is we either worship Christ or we worship ourselves. I want to show you how this works.

[4 : 36] He's a child. And even after the last verse of chapter 1, his impact is massive and universal and decisive. It is almost as though at the end of chapter 1, since Jesus comes into the world, nothing is ever the same.

And even the stars themselves cosmically move to bow down before him in desperate hope that humanity will wake up and realise what we have in this child.

I sometimes drive my son's car and it has a wire loose in the radio. And I was driving home the other night in it and every now and again the radio just comes on.

And I was semi-somnolent driving and the radio came on at a very high volume and I jumped out of my skin. And I was completely awake for a long time after it. But that's not a great illustration.

But imagine that I was lost in the fog, the fog that we have right now, and a voice comes on and says, if you keep driving that direction, you'll end up in Richmond where a lot of people have been lost forever.

[5 : 53] But if you follow this light, you'll get home. That's more what's going on here in Matthew 2. So...

Yes. Sorry about that for all those who live in Richmond. So the chapter opens in the first verse by introducing Herod the king.

Herod, he has... He seems to have untouchable power and authority. And when you get to the end of the chapter, there are two just very quick verses to the fact that he dies. King Herod was not a good man.

He was not a Jew. He was imposed on Israel by the Romans because of his military skill. Skill, sorry. He was brutal and cruel and ruthless. He surrounded himself with a guard of 2,000 Roman soldiers.

And he set up a secret police to hear what his enemies were saying. And he taxed Israel so heavily, he was able to build the fortress in Jerusalem, the temple, the Caesarea Maritima, and Masada as a summer escape place.

[7 : 00] And he was so jealous of his second wife, his first wife he'd put away. He was so jealous of his second wife, he had her tried for adultery. And he forced her mother to testify against her.

And after the trial was over, she was found guilty. He executed his wife and her mother and his brother-in-law and her uncle and her grandfather.

That's the kind of guy he was. That was 29 BC. He executed hundreds of political opponents in Israel. And the closer we get to the time of Jesus' birth, the more paranoid he became.

He executed three of his own sons. Yeah. He was a terrible combination of a man with great power and massively insecure. He worshipped himself.

And he worshipped his own power, which meant Jesus had to be annihilated. See, verse 2, he hears deeply troubling news.

[8 : 01] Wise men from the east come to Jerusalem and they say, where is he born, king of the Jews? Now, preachers like to point out, we don't know how many wise men there were.

You heard it this morning. Preachers point out, they love to point out, they weren't kings, they were magi, there are no camels mentioned. We don't know camels at all.

No star. Well, there was a star there. We don't know their names. They don't go to the manger. They go to the house in verse 11. And they come from the east. Could be China.

Interesting, isn't it? But none of that really matters. Although it has bred some very funny Christmas cards. You know, guys on camels with sat navs checking their sat navs against the stars, which my experience with sat navs, I've followed the stars better.

Or guys on camels with, you know, diapers as well as gold. And three guys on camels with gold, myrrh and Frankenstein. That's a younger card.

[9 : 07] However, it's the words of the wise men, the facts that we've got here that are important. And this word magi, wise men, covers those who are really at the top of their game in the ancient Near East.

They're astrologers, philosophers, intellectuals. They have come a massive way. And by now, Jerusalem had heard the rumors of angels, the shepherds in the fields.

That was some months before. And these men come to Jerusalem, wealthy, exotic, from far away. And most deeply troubling for Herod, they ask this question, where is he born king of the Jews?

Because the only thing Herod could not take was any challenge to his rule. And that question they ask is a very interesting question. They do not ask, where is he who is born to become the king of the Jews later on?

Where is he who will be the king of the Jews later? The one who is born already king of the Jews, who's not going to have kingly status conferred on him by anyone else, except by the fact that he has been born.

[10 : 14] And when that question gets around Jerusalem, there is a large sucking in of breath, because that is the one thing you do not talk about in front of Herod. Any rival to Herod is treated with murderous, horrifying efficiency.

And the reason this is here for us, and the reason, you know, every one of us is a little Herod. And we all nurse and coddle this petty potentate in our hearts.

We all worship ourselves in one form or another. Some of us do it in very sociably acceptable ways. You may not have a guard of 2,000 people to do your bidding, but just you try and threaten me and I'll get back at you.

The birth of Jesus as the king exposes this Herod disease in all of us. We imagine that we can run our lives in our own way and pretend to ourselves that we're in charge.

And so much today that passes for progress, you know, my right to choose, my right to express my own identity, it just deepens the grip of the inner Herod on me. God has no right to tell me how to live my life, how to spend my retirement, how to treat those who do me wrong, what to do with my body.

[11 : 29] And even though Jesus is just a little child now, he is more threatening to Herod than any foreign army or domestic mutiny as he is still. Because he was born a king, not just of the Jews but of the world.

And his kingship, as we'll see in a moment, shatters and shakes our selfish sovereignty to the bootstraps. And every Christmas we come to this, we have to make a decision.

Are we going to bow and worship this Christ or are we going to continue to worship ourselves? Are we going to go to him and offer ourselves to him and receive his gifts? And the decision is put in front of Herod in the most innocent way because the wise men say to him, the one thing we want to do is we want to go and worship the child.

That's blasphemy to Herod. We, from the East, recognise the universal rule of this child. He may be born your king but he's our king as well, they say.

And we acknowledge him as the heart of all that's good and greater than any other human being. And so for Herod, things are much worse than it thought. So he calls the wise men and he says, go find the child so that I might come and worship him too.

[12 : 42] This is an infallible sign that we are worshipping ourselves and not Christ. It is the ability to say things with our lips while our hearts plot something very different. Herod has decided to destroy Jesus Christ and continue his self-worship and his lips are telling lies.

But self-worship doesn't always show itself in violence and insecurity. It's an insidious and sneaky thing and shows in very respectable ways in sophisticated West Coast people.

What's terribly exposing about this is that we can practice our faith as a way of self-worship. We can deceive ourselves and the truth not be in us.

So in verse 4 Herod calls the Bible guys in Jerusalem. These are chief priests and scribes and he says to them where is the Christ to be born?

And without even looking at the text within seconds they know exactly the answer. they know chapter and verse they go straight to the book of Micah and they say in Bethlehem Herod just a couple of kilometers down the road little smidgen of a town that's where our greatest ruler was born David King David remember him?

[13 : 57] He was a wonderful ruler O Herod he didn't ride roughshod over the people he was a shepherd ruler tender and caring it's just I think there's a little bit of irony at the end of that. These are the Bible guys they are self-taught and they teach others they know the prophecy of the star in the Old Testament and they know many kings will come and bow down before the Messiah the very verse they quote from in Micah says that the ruler who comes will rule from the days of eternity he's more than human and here is the thing not one single one of them go to Bethlehem you can hear how assured their knowledge is they're 100% certain that the anointed son of God is to be born in Bethlehem down the road they're completely certain because this is the place David was born that the script they quote two passages in that little combination there which give a picture of God's son and ruler as the shepherd and carer of his people no ordinary king who rule forever the one on whom the spirit of the Lord rests and if you push the button on them they would have been able to say the spirit of wisdom and understanding of might and counsel and knowledge and fear of the Lord a bruised reed he will not break a faintly burning they know it all and they recognise this is not good news for Herod but it's the best possible news for them at least that's what their lips declare but there seems to be a deadly passivity in these guys not one of them takes any action and goes to Jerusalem

I mean if you look at the text there ought to be a verse between verse 6 and verse 7 oughtn't there verse 6 ought to be a foot race amongst the chief priests and scribes down to Bethlehem they ought to race down there and bow and worship finally our Messiah has come but they do not it's almost as though they have substituted knowledge for real active faith which means their faith is worth nothing because it doesn't move them an iota closer to Jesus and this too is a form of self-worship accumulating knowledge without action demonstrates there's something more important in my life than Jesus it's very searching isn't it it's a searching test of our self-worship to ask am i obeying all that i know or trying to you know have i moved closer to Christ this last year am i offering him more of myself because everything i learn and do not practice adds to my condemnation and these bible guys they've heard the rumors of angels they've heard of the appearing to the shepherds they know the wise men are in town but they have a lethal lethargy and 30 years later Jesus says to some of their children who are pharisees in the same position he says you want to me with your lips but your hearts are far away from me issues not ignorance it's not a lack of understanding it's a deadly passivity and lethargy it's a lack of desire to honor God and it's just as dangerous as the open hostility of King Herod and this is so often the case that those who are closest to the grace of God and most familiar with the teachings of Jesus Christ refuse to bow to Jesus Christ in their hearts we can pay lip service to him and we can know a great deal and we can use that knowledge to keep Jesus at a distance we can use our religious knowledge as a way of avoiding worshiping Christ it just becomes a form of self-worship there's no hunger in it there's no humility in it it's just a sense of my own superiority and the way it shows infallibly is in a lack of action knowing the right answers quick with the lips but the feet stay planted it's having heads that are better than our hearts i mean i think that's what was so delightful about a little girl in the children's focus her heart is way ahead of a head pleases God and what a beautiful contrast we have in the wise men i mean verses 9 to 13 the whole passage changes and for a few moments things are as they should be we follow the wise men to Jesus as a child the star leads them i don't know how and they are deliriously happy in verse 11 they see the child with Mary his mother but their worship is reserved for the child alone they bow down and worship and they take out of their treasures these extravagant gifts and they offer them to the child and then they are warned in a dream that Herod wants to kill the child so they return to where they come from and we never hear of them again although there are a group of magi in 66

AD who visit Nero and i think these wise men are very important for us they are meant here to show us that no human being is unaffected by the birth of jesus christ that the arrival of this baby represents the universal majesty of the child that jesus is not born just king of the jews but his kingship and his shepherding extends east west north and south i don't think we should get hung up on the star i don't understand how a star can lead you to a house i don't understand that but the point i think as i mentioned earlier is that universe itself is bending down to the one who holds the universe in its hand the baby the savior of the world and together the star and the magi tell us that god has sent jesus to be lord and christ savior not just of those who name him but of hindoos and muslims and sikhs and buddhists who must come to worship him he is of worldwide importance and the wise men are a fantastic example to us of spiritual hunger and humility they take such enormous risk and effort but they have such little knowledge and understanding yet god is so kind he even draws these people through misunderstandings as he does us and they follow his lead with hunger and humility i mean it is just amazing faith that they bow down and worship this child they don't have the old testament they haven't seen any miracles they haven't seen this baby get up and walk on water or change water into wine or feed the hungry or still the storm they haven't heard this jesus teaching they haven't heard his eternal words but because they acted on what god had showed them their hunger and humility brought them to bow before jesus and to confess him as their lord even as a child and here's the thing they worship him for who he is before they know he can do anything for for them that's true worship and on the day of judgment the magi will rise from the east and they will condemn all those who worship themselves all those who honor god with their lips whose hearts are far from him and i just want to finish with this i i'd love to do the second half of the chapter we don't have time the only words the magi speak are in verse two these driving concerns for them what's driving them is the person of jesus christ they're trying to find the one born king of the jews to worship him they're not after a politician political leader they're not after a movement they're not after an idea they're after the one to whom the stars point they say we saw his star and here is what god is saying to us this morning we need to worship jesus with all our hearts we need to turn away from our self-worship in all its forms whether you're playing herod or whether your lips are saying one thing and your heart is far from christ jesus is the axis around which god is working salvation and blessing and goodness and joy and we need to act we need to walk in the footsteps of the wise we need to worship jesus without embarrassment but with extravagance offering him the best of who we are what we have drawing near to him because he has drawn near to us that's what matthew 2 teaches us with life and joy and saving grace let's kneel together and pray