

Magi

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- [0 : 00] It's Christmas time. It's that time of year when presents are under the tree, or in our case, hidden away in cupboards so that little fingers don't get to them in advance.
- It's that time when we've spent a fair bit of time, hopefully, in picking out presents, taking lots of time to think about it, to get the right present to the right person.
- I've got to say that's particularly not a gift that I have, personally. I'm grateful that Nat does most of our present picking in our place, and she often does some great gifts.
- I'm pretty sure that I'm not going to receive any of these gifts tomorrow. Pretty confident of that. For instance, microphone tongs.
- They are for the multitasking kitchen lover person who is quite joyful when they're in the kitchen, or the snuggie. Sort of reminiscent of a bit of the Vicar of Dibley, I think.
- [1 : 01] I kind of feel like I'm cuddling a bishop or something, I think, if I had that. Spray on hair, although I believe I might need it soon. It's not something that I suspect I'm going to get.
- Or this one, smoking mittens. Not even the cold can keep you away from a cigarette. Or there's the coffin couch. That's pretty hideous, I think.
- Some of us might need emergency underpants, just like a box of tissues. Pull them out when you need them. Hopefully, they're not as thin as tissues.
- And one that I just cannot comprehend why this would be the case for a teenager, this is a teenage one, a school exam simulator. It's a computer game.
- Like, serious. Who would buy a school exam simulator? Now, not to be outdone, there are some, in fact, worst baby gifts ever that you could possibly give.
- [2 : 02] For instance, there's the crib dribbler. However, many years ago on a pig farm, we had this sort of stuff for pigs in their pens. They could sort of feed themselves wherever they need to.
- Of course, when the baby's awake, you can attach the baby mop to them and let them go around the floor. If the crib dribbler is not up for you, then there's the bacon baby powder.
- Bacon-flavoured baby powder. Now, I'm all for bacon. But seriously, bacon-flavoured baby powder. There's the baby keeper, again, for the multitasker. If you don't get the multitasker bum, you just want to sort of hang the kids somewhere.
- Just leave them there. For the potty trainers, there's the iPad potty. That can be useful, I'd imagine. Probably slightly inappropriate in northern New South Wales and parts of South Africa is the shark sleeping suit for the kids.
- There's also, for the wintertime, there's the snug a baby. Carry your baby. Is that the weirdest thing that you've ever seen? Having your baby's head poking up through there.
- [3 : 08] Now, if, of course, you don't want to buy any of these gifts but continually want to screw up your children, then just get the book, Seven Ways to Traumatise Your Children, and just be done with it rather than buy those gifts for them.

A bunch of weird gifts out there. These things make the list of worst Christmas presents ever. I wonder if you ever noticed, as Sam read through the Christmas account, though, that the gifts that Jesus received, there in verse 11 in Matthew chapter 2, were pretty strange gifts for him to receive.

Normally, you'd go, you know, take some Lego, take some flowers, a baby jumpsuit, or something useful, or something like that. And here, Jesus gets a bunch of strange gifts. He's presented with gifts of gold, and of incense, and of myrrh.

Now, on one level, you could say that as a poor peasant girl, Mary would have been stoked. These are expensive gifts that have been brought to her.

And so this baby comes with a pretty extensive trust fund. But they would have been sitting there, kind of confused, as these magi came in.

[4 : 20] Gold? A weird gift for a baby. It's a gift that you brought to an audience for a king in the ancient Near East.

Incense was used in temple worship in Jerusalem as a symbol of prayer. It pointed to a relationship with God. And myrrh was used to embalm corpses for funerals.

It's a gift that speaks of death. Imagine one of the presents under my tree tonight for my four-year-old was a little coffin.

You know, if it wasn't a joke present where the skeleton sort of jumped up and said something, just a serious gift, you know, here's a little coffin. And there might be days when you kind of wish it, but you sort of think a coffin, it symbolizes death.

What a strange gift. These gifts here are all about Jesus. They're about Jesus confronting the world. They reveal the significance of who he is, what he came to do, and how he did it.

[5 : 29] The first gift stresses the kingship of Jesus, a king at birth. The magi ask the question, where is the one born who has been born king of the Jews?

As we've seen, they brought gifts appropriate for a king, gold. And what alerted them to Jesus was, in fact, the second half of verse 2, where it says, we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.

In the ancient world, most people believed in astrology. It's not surprising, the steady course of the stars and the planets represented a settled order in the universe.

They assumed that astronomical events that were out of the ordinary was God breaking into his ordered world to announce something, making some news.

And a particular event in history caused particularly stars to be associated with kings and rulers. You see, when Julius Caesar died in 44 BC, one of the most astonishing flukes in history took place.

[6 : 45] A nova appeared in the sky above his funeral. And from that moment on, stars were associated with great men, became the fashion.

And of course, linked with that was this very strong rumor that went around the first century that world domination would come out of Judea. Famous first century historians like Tacitus and Josephus and Suetonius all recorded it.

And so it wouldn't be surprising for the Magi to conclude that political changes were on the way when they saw the star. These Magi, they were wise men.

They were knowledgeable astrologers and magicians and interpreters of dreams. They were stargazers. And what they saw was most likely the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.

It happened three times in 7 BC on the 23rd of May, the 3rd of October and the 4th of December. Jupiter and Saturn.

[7 : 54] Jupiter was the royal planet. Saturn had long been the symbol of Israel. And so the competent astrologer would have concluded that a new age was beginning in which the rule of the world was about to shift to Judea.

And so they set out for Judea. They set out on a long and difficult journey to find the ruler of the world and to offer him gifts as the new king of the world.

And so they gave him gold. And incense was used by the priests in the temple. And so here they were acknowledging that before them was the ultimate priest.

Jesus is the one who would mediate between God and humanity. The one who would bring about a complete reconciliation between God and people. Jesus is the one who would establish that relationship.

And then myrrh was used to embalm the dead. The man born a king was a man born to die. That is what he needed to do in order to bring about the reconciliation between God and humanity was to die.

[9 : 06] Jesus would die for the sins of humanity. It's interesting. The title, King of the Jews, is used only twice in Matthew's gospel. It's used here at the birth of Jesus.

And it's used again at the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus exercises his kingship by sacrificing himself for us to bring us back into relationship with God.

And so these strange gifts represent who Jesus is, what he came to do, and what it cost him to do it.

One thing you notice throughout the historical biographies of Jesus is that whenever Jesus turns up, he divides people.

People have different opinions about him, much like people do today. And here at the very start of his life, we see at least two camps forming.

[10 : 06] One full of praise and welcome, and the other one full of hatred and opposition. That the Magi and Herod here stand out as polar opposites.

You see Herod in verse 8, he's just lying through his teeth when he says, Go and make a careful search of the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him.

He's lying. He has about as much interest in worshipping Jesus as I have in taking up cross-stitching lessons, which is very little, I can tell you.

And we know this because in the rest of Matthew chapter 2, it says that the Herod didn't fool the Magi. They sneak off without telling Herod where Jesus is.

And Herod is so furious that he orders all the boys two years older and under around the vicinity of Bethlehem to be murdered. That is, Herod wants Jesus to be wiped out.

[11 : 06] You see, Herod doesn't like the news that another king has been born. He would have heard the rumours of the new king and he was threatened by it.

You see, Herod had been appointed by the Romans as king of the Jews for 40 years. He was appointed by the Roman Senate in 40 BC. He gained control of the whole country in 37 BC.

And he died in 4 BC, most likely not long after this event. And he was infamous for his cruelty in which he dealt with possible rivals to his throne.

He killed his favourite wife. He had several. He killed his favourite wife and two of his sons because he had this idea that they were plotting against him to take his throne. And so Herod's response was hatred and fear.

A hatred of anything or anyone that threatened his self-centredness and his autonomy. He had a lust for power and control that blunted his better qualities.

[12 : 14] Of course, Herod was spot on about his assessment of all these events. Someone more important than him had been born. The baby lying in the manger was and is the king of the Jews, but also the king of heaven and earth.

Jesus is someone so important that he has a right to tell us how to live and demand allegiance. Herod certainly got that bit right, but he got it wrong when he thought that Jesus was a political opponent.

He thought that Jesus was going to get an army and push him around. Yes, Jesus is king, but he's a king who came to save and to serve. When the angels came to Joseph and told him that Mary was pregnant, this is what they said.

She will give birth to a son and you're to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. And this is exactly what Herod does not understand.

Herod doesn't see that Jesus came to save and serve. And so he is threatened by Jesus. And so he acts with dishonesty and brutality. Herod is blinded by his arrogance and his sense of self-importance.

[13 : 28] I wonder whether the thought of Jesus being your king, as we have sung a number of times already tonight, gets your bristles up. Maybe a little mini Herod fighting a turf war with Jesus in control of your life.

Is that your position this Christmas in 2015? That is that Jesus is a threat to your rule. When Queen Victoria ruled as the British monarch in the 1800s, she controlled approximately a third of the world.

And she said one day that she couldn't wait to meet Jesus. Why? Her response was, so that I can cast my crown before him.

She recognized that even as one of the most powerful people in the world, she too had a ruler. One who deserved her everything, even her crown.

One who deserved her. It was a tough war with Jesus that you cannot win. Now Herod isn't the only negative reaction to Jesus here.

[14 : 44] The other reaction is not as strong as Herod's, but it is a negative reaction. They're the ones who simply do nothing about Jesus. He is a non-entity in their lives.

And this group is remarkably represented by the chief priests and the scribes. Notice in verse 4, gathering together. This is what Herod does.

Gathers all together the chief priests and the scribe of the people and inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. These are the guys who are looking for the Messiah to come.

These are the guys who knew the rumors that something significant was happening. And when they tell the Magi, well, that was it.

It was back to business for them. The sheer silence and inactivity of the religious leaders is overwhelming in view of the magnitude of what has happened.

[15 : 46] They didn't even lift a sandal. Why did they not go with the Magi? They knew it all. But they did nothing.

They knew their scriptures. They had no problem in answering Herod, giving the Magi directions. But they missed Jesus.

They missed God in our midst. They didn't go to greet Him. They didn't worship Him. Their apathy eventually hardened into outright opposition to Jesus.

And friends, this has got to be a warning for us who hear these stories again and again and again about baby Jesus. For he who acknowledge who He is.

It is quite clear that knowledge of Him is no substitute to obedience of Him. What's astonishing is that the positive reaction to Jesus comes from the Magi.

[16 : 57] Because the rest of the Bible, these guys are viewed pretty negatively. Only Matthew talks about these guys in positive terms. Impressed by what they saw in the sky one night, they packed their bags.

They took a journey of over 1,500 kilometers west of Judea to find out what it all meant. It's so astonishing that men with so little to go on should venture so far, endure such hardship in travel, and face such uncertainty of actually finding the one to whom the star pointed.

And what is more, they gave Him costly gifts and the worship and the honor of their hearts. Where the religious leaders expended no time, no energy, no expense, no inconvenience.

Where Herod expended a great deal of time and energy and expense and inconvenience to try and find and kill Jesus. The Magi expend a great deal of time and energy and expense and the love of their hearts.

So that they could worship Jesus and honor Jesus. The Magi here are the worshipers. Those who fully ascribe dignity and authority and honor to King Jesus.

[18 : 23] And whose lives are satisfied in Him as the wisdom of the world. These wise men have found their wisdom. And so there we have indifference and hostility or worship.

They're the responses to this Jesus. And if your response is maybe indifference or maybe even a little bit of hostility, I want to make one suggestion this Christmas.

Now I figure you've got a bunch of stuff on your plate in the next few days. But maybe in the near future, you might want to take a look at the issue of who Jesus is, what He came to do, and what it cost Him to do it.

The Magi were the knowledgeable men of the East. The Oxford Dons. They were the academic elite. But their knowledge about these events of the first Christmas took them only so far.

Their observation of the world, of the star, took them to Jerusalem. But that's as far as they got. In the end, they had to consult the Scriptures, the Word of God, to find out where Jesus was to be born.

[19 : 43] They had to find Jesus through the Bible. And so can I encourage you to be like these wise men and go to the source?

There's a danger in thinking that you've got the Christmas story all worked out because you've seen a bunch of nativity scenes in shopping centers or that you've sung a bunch of Christmas carols.

We're going to sing a Christmas carol in the moment. That's not quite correct. We three kings of Orient are. Nothing in the Bible says that they're kings. Nothing in the Bible even says that there's three of them.

There's three presents. Acknowledge that. But I'm going to give nat three presents. Well, I've given nat three presents. Maybe not tomorrow. I'll give nat three presents. But there's not three of me. Go to the source of the actual facts that point us to Jesus with clarity.

There are a lot of opinions out there about Jesus today. Today, why not go to the source, read the Gospels again and consider Jesus. And ponder who Jesus is.

[20 : 50] What he came to do. And what it cost him to do it. And what it means for you to live a life that worships him. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.