

The Child Arrives

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] And let me add my welcome to the other welcomes here this morning. My name's Steve. I've never met you before. I've seen you past here at St Paul's. And what a great day to be gathering on this Christmas Day to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Christmas is huge. It's big. It is incredible that something that is started so small would grow into something as magnificent as it is today.

So small that a poor, unwed teenage girl would give birth to a baby. And this day, 2,000 years later, around half of the world's population, 3.5 billion people celebrate Christmas.

160 countries in our world declare it to be a holiday season. That's over 80% of our countries in this world declare it to be a holiday season.

To go from something so small to something so big points to something clearly very significant that's happening here on this very first Christmas Day.

[1 : 08] It's celebrated differently around the world. But one of the interesting things about Christmas, which we don't get in any other celebrations throughout our calendar year in the year, is the fact that the giving and receiving as gifts is so widely spread.

You know, like birthdays or retirement, that sort of stuff. It's normally one person getting all the gifts. Whereas Christmas is about everyone involving and sharing the gifts.

And it's pointing to the symbolic nature of the magnificence of the gift of Jesus Christ. Who he is and what he has come to do for our sake.

That's what makes Christmas so, so big. And that's where we want to head today as we look at Matthew chapter 2. It'd be great if you got your Bibles open. We want to see three personal gifts, three personal reactions, and one personal response to the person of Jesus.

So three personal gifts. We read there in verse 11. Jesus, as a baby, received a bunch of gifts, three gifts from some strangers. Odd sort of thing.

[2 : 20] He gets gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. As a poor peasant girl, Mary would have been fairly pleased, I'd imagine, with this.

You know, like these are expensive gifts. And so this newborn baby comes with this extensive trust fund that would have been deeply encouraging for her.

But these gifts are deeply personal and confusing at the same time. They reveal, in the end, three significant things.

Who Jesus is, what he came to do, and how he did it. The gold that he receives points to the kingship of Jesus.

Gold was a gift that was brought to an audience of a king in the ancient Near East in the first century. You didn't turn up to a king without a gift of gold.

[3 : 17] So the Magi, when they turned up, were expecting to see a king. Once upon a time when Queen Elizabeth II visited Australia, the nation, the grateful nation of Australia, gave her the 50th edition of Who's Who in Australia.

That's the gift she received. Obviously, we really appreciate her. So they turn up to say, where is the one born who's to be born king of the Jews?

And what alerted them to the arrival of a new king is in the second half of verse 2. We saw his star in the east and we have come to worship him.

Now, the Magi were astrologers. They were magicians and interpreters of dreams. And in the ancient world, people believed in astrology.

And so the Magi, in their culture, were considered the elite. They were the academics. They were the wise men, the professors. And when these guys saw the star, they really recognised in this moment that something significant was happening.

[4 : 33] Why is that? Well, in 44 BC, Julius Caesar, when he died, one of the most astonishing flukes in history, if you like, took place.

A nova appeared in the sky above his funeral. And so from that moment on in the ancient Near East, stars were associated with great men and particularly rulers.

And so these Magi are putting two and two together here. And so what would have particularly encouraged them to dust off their passports and head off was the strong rumour in the first century that there would be a change in world dominion.

Rule would start to come out of centralised in Judea. Famous and diverse first century historians like Tacitus, Josephus and Suetonius all recorded this incident.

It would have been not really much of a leap at all for the Magi to conclude that political changes were underway when they saw the star.

[5 : 50] And they set out on this long and difficult journey to find the ruler of the world and to offer him gold. But frankincense or incense was an unexpected gift.

Because this gift was used by priests in the temple as they mediated between God and people. That is, frankincense was symbolic of relationship with God.

And so the Magi were recognising Jesus at this point, not just as a king, but as a priest. The one who would mediate between God and humanity, the divine and a rebellious people.

But the third gift would have really been something that would have thrown any brand new mother, the gift of myrrh. That's because in the first century ancient Near East, myrrh was the main ingredient for the embalming of a dead body.

It's a symbol of death. And so the gift of myrrh is prophetic. The baby born a king and priest was a baby born to die.

[7 : 06] And that, in the end, is what was needed to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity. Jesus would die for the sins of humanity.

The title, King of the Jews, is only used twice in Matthew's Gospel. Here at the birth of Jesus, again at the crucifixion of Jesus.

Born a king who exercises his rule by sacrificing himself to bring us back into relationship with God. That's the three gifts.

Who Jesus is, what he came to do, and how he would do it. And then, in this text, we see three reactions to the person of Jesus.

One thing you notice in all the historical biographies of Jesus is that whenever Jesus turns up, he divides people's opinion rapidly.

[8 : 07] It's like he's this bowling ball. It just sort of smashes people's views. And see, here at the start of his life, we see three immediate reactions. And really, if you like, two groups, two camps forming already.

One is full of praise and welcome. The other is full of hatred, opposition, and indifference. So first of all, we have hostile Herod. Herod lies through his teeth.

Verse 8. Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him. Now, Herod has as much interest in worshipping Jesus as I have to take up knitting lessons.

Which, you don't know me, no interest at all. Later in the chapter, we read Herod didn't fool the Magi. They sneak off a different way, telling, you know, without telling Herod where Jesus is.

And he is furious. He is furious, Herod. So furious. He orders all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and all of its surrounds to be put to death.

[9 : 19] And Mel was right. I heard Mel there when she's reading the emotion associated with that. This guy is a brutal tyrant. A brutal tyrant.

He was known to be brutal. Anyone who challenged his authority at all was murdered. He killed one of his wives and two of his sons.

He's the Roman appointed king of the Jews. And he does not like the news that a king has been born. He is immediately threatened. And his response is hatred and fear.

A hatred of anything or anyone that threatened his self-centeredness and autonomy. This account of deception and fear, bloodshed, injustice and homelessness are all too familiar.

There is an awful lot wrong in our world today. One under the spectrum says that the reason there's so much problem in our world today is because of the rich and powerful.

[10:29] We need to blame the rich and powerful people. This world tends to make the poor, the minority groups in our world the heroes, the victims and the heroes at the same time.

The other end of the spectrum are those who insist that it's the immoral, irresponsible people who are the main problem in our world. And this view of the world tends to make hardworking, decent, middle class people, the heroes of the world.

And yet what we have here, and in fact the full teaching of the Bible, is that the source of evil in the world and the source of our problems in life, the underlying issue of everything, is in fact the human heart.

Herod's reaction to Jesus here is just a glimpse of all of us. If you want to be king, you want to rule your life, autonomous over your life, and someone else comes along and says that they're king, then only one person has to give way.

Only one person can sit on the absolute throne. And Jesus came into this world and in from his birth, his claim to be king, to be God, to be the ultimate ruler of all things.

[11:57] And throughout his life, he calls for an allegiance so supreme that it makes all other commitments in life look weak in comparison.

It is a claim to absolute authority, a summons to unconditional loyalty, and it inevitably triggers deep resistance from every human heart.

Who has the right to rule my life? That is the most disturbing question possible for any human heart. We want to remain on the throne of our lives at all costs.

It's interesting how we do it. Some of us use religion to hold God at arm's length. We try to put God into a position where he owes us in some kind of way because, you know, we've been obedient or we do things for him.

And so we want to, ultimately, we want to stay on control of our thrones. We want to be in, and we want to keep even God in our back pockets of controlling. So some of us use religion. Some of us flee from religion altogether, become atheists maybe, and they only proclaim that there is no God.

[13:17] Either way, we're expressing our natural hostility to anyone controlling, ruling our life, and particularly God. What is interesting here, if you read to the verse 19, Herod could not get rid of Jesus, even with an entire army at his disposal.

In fact, verse 19 says, just very simply, Herod died. He died. That's Herod, hostile Herod. And then we have the passive priests.

Their reaction is not as hostile as Herod, but it's just as negative. They're the ones who simply do nothing. He is a non-entity in their life. And this group is represented by the chief priests and the scribes.

Verse 4, gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, Herod inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, well, this is what history tells us.

This is what we know about where the Messiah, the king of the Jews, is to be born. He's going to be born in Bethlehem. They told him, these are the elite, these are the scholars, these are the Bible guys, and they said, here it is.

[14:32] He's going to be born there. And then it was back to normal for them. They didn't even so much as raise a sandal. Why not go with the Magi?

This is your job after all to know where the Messiah is and when he's coming. Why not go with them? They knew it all, and yet they knew nothing. They knew their Bibles.

They were the scholars. They had no problem in answering Herod, and yet they entirely missed God. Their apathy eventually handed into outright opposition to Jesus.

In the end, their knowledge of Jesus and who he is made as no substitute for obedience to him. But the final reaction we see, and the only positive one, is the malleable Magi.

It's the best word I could find to represent their response that starts with an M. I'm trying to get it all working out here. Their response is remarkable. Impressed by what they saw in the sky that night, they journeyed west to Judea to find out what it all meant.

[15:44] It is astonishing that these men with so little to go on should venture so far to endure such hardship in travel and face such uncertainty of finding the one to whom the star pointed.

And what is more, they gave him costly gifts and the worship and the honour of their hearts.

It is astonishing where the religious leaders expend no time, no energy, no expense or inconvenience, where Herod expended a great deal of time and energy and expense and inconvenience to try and find Jesus in order to kill him.

The Magi expend a great deal of time and energy and expense and inconvenience to try and find Jesus so that they could worship and honour him. The Magi are the worshippers, the ones who joyfully ascribe dignity, authority and honour to King Jesus and whose lives are satisfied in him. Even if they did not know fully what they were getting into at this point, they went on the journey expecting to see a king, which is why they turned up to the palace in Jerusalem.

[17 : 14] Instead, they were directed to a king, not like Herod, a king, not a tyrannical ruler, not in a palace, not in a throne, but to a king in a manger, a baby, helpless, weak and humble.

The kingship of Jesus is fundamentally different than the kingship of Herod. when Queen Victoria ruled as the British monarch in the 1800s, she controlled a third of the world at that point and one day she said that she couldn't wait to meet Jesus and she was asked why and her response was profound, so that I can cast my crown before him.

Even Queen Victoria recognised that even as she, in fact, at that time, the most powerful person in the world, she too had a ruler, one who deserved her everything, even her crown.

So there's the, there's the two, the three broad responses, indifference, hostility and worship and really they're, they're, they're divided into two camps, the positive and the negative.

So I want to speak to two broad groups here today about what your personal response might be.

Firstly, the Christians. Let me just say those who accept Jesus and Christmas and Christianity.

[18 : 53] If that is you, I think it's important for you to remember that every Christian still has a heart of residual anger and hostility towards God.

Every one of us. and it will always be there to the end. And that is why it is so hard to pray, to give, to obey, to grow.

There is still that Herod in each of us. There is still something in us that fights God. We cannot glide through the Christian life.

We've got to be far more intentional about Christian growth to overcome all of those bad habits. which is why we keep talking about taking your next step here at St Paul's.

But taking your next step knowing that the God who you are obeying is not Herod, a tyrannical ruler. He is a God of grace and mercy.

[19 : 56] A God who laid aside his glory as we have already sung this morning and descended humbly to serve us. That kind of king is calling you to follow him.

Now, if however you're here today and you're unsure about Christmas and Christianity or perhaps even the existence of God, if there's one thing you want to hear from me, you need to hear this. you are not objective in your view. You are not objective in your view of Jesus and God and Christmas and Christianity.

It is an absolute fallacy that anyone would say that they're objective. You're not. The philosopher Thomas Nagel, he's an American philosopher, he's an atheist, who's very candid about this point. He wrote, I'm talking about the fear of religion itself. I'm speaking from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself. I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well informed people I know are religious believers.

[21 : 19] It isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally I hope that my belief is right. I hope there is no God. I don't want there to be a God.

I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is that cosmic authority problem is not rare. His point is, and which is why I respect him at this point, is that he's entirely honest.

He's entirely honest. honest. Nobody is neutral about whether Christmas is true. Thomas Nagel is entirely honest.

I don't want there to be a God who rules my life. I want to be Herod in my life. none of us are neutral about whether Christmas is true.

If the Son of God was really born in a manger, then every single person has lost the rights to oversee their lives, if it's true. You cannot be objective about a claim like that.

[22 : 32] So just keep that in mind for the rest of Christmas Day, if that's where you sit at the moment. In other words, what I'm encouraging you to do is question your doubts.

Doubt your doubts, if you like. Now I figure you've got a bunch of stuff on your plate in the next 24 hours, the next few days, but maybe soon you might want to look at that issue, come back to it again.

Who is Jesus? What did he come to do and what did it cost him to do it? The Magi were the knowledgeable men of the East.

They were the wise men, the sages, the elites, the academic elite, but their knowledge about the events of the first Christmas only took them so far.

It only took them to the palace in Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Their observation of the star took them to Jerusalem, but that's it. The only way they got to Bethlehem was because of the scholars saying, the Bible says he's over there.

[23 : 47] They had to consult the Bible to find Jesus, and in finding Jesus, they found what they had been looking for all of their life. These wise men found the wisdom that they had been looking for all of their life.

So I just want to say it without explaining it. I haven't got time to explain it, unpack it, and you'd be grateful for that right now. Jesus is the answer to everything that you've been searching for your entire life.

There you go. I'm not going to unpack that any further than that. I just hope that sits. He is your goal. He is your destination in life. I'm hoping that encourages you to pursue that.

Why would I make such an outrageous claim? I want to encourage you to be like these wise men and search for Jesus. But go to the source.

The evidence is overwhelming and it is compelling. As Ash told us this morning, there are New Testaments, there are Bibles floating around everywhere in this place, out there in the free.

[25 : 00] If you haven't got one, take it and go. Take it and read it. Or there's a few copies of this, Is Christmas Unbelievable? Or there's other ones like Word Wonder.

We here at St. Paul's would be delighted at any point to sit with you and to engage with those questions you have and to help you see why Jesus is the wisdom you've been searching for all of your life.

And even if that means if you're online and you're at another part of this world, such as my mate Matt, who's currently in Utah, checking in for the service.

You two guys in Utah, check in if you like. We'd be delighted to help you see why Jesus is the answer. So consider Jesus. That's the call for this Christmas.

Ponder who he is, what he came to do, and what it cost him to do it, and what it means now to bow down and worship him 2,000 years later.

[26 : 04] Merry Christmas.