

Seeking the True King

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- [0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Beth. Good morning, everyone. Delighted to repeat, JT's welcome, whether you're with us in the church or watching the live stream or listening to the audio recording, you're very welcome.
- Have you ever noticed how different Matthew and Luke's accounts of the nativity are? It's not just that they record different events, although they do.
- It's not just that Matthew is told largely from Joseph's viewpoint and Luke from Mary's. It's in the whole tone of what they say.
- Luke is joyful. We've been thinking of the joy of Christmas this morning with JT and earlier at the breaking of bread, and it very much comes across in Luke's gospel.
- The message of the angels is don't be afraid and effectively rejoice. They bring good news of great joy. Three people, Mary, Zechariah and Simeon, break out into spontaneous songs of joy.
- [1 : 0 3] And it seems that everyone from the unborn John the Baptist to the octogenarian Anna is rejoicing in Luke. Matthew is quite different.
- Matthew is a lot more gritty. Matthew addresses some issues which actually in many ways seem still quite current. A unmarried teenager is unexpectedly pregnant.
- A crow, jealous dictator commits genocide in an attempt to get rid of a perceived rival. A family of refugees flee for their lives to another country.
- It's quite tough stuff in Matthew. If Luke's message is don't be afraid, in some ways Matthew is be afraid, be very afraid at least at some points.
- But in the middle there's the passage that we're looking at this morning. And the one mention of joy in Matthew's account of the Nativity. But even this passage is a little bit weird, isn't it?
- [2 : 2 1] People finding meaning in stars and in dreams. That's not the kind of thing as Christians that we would normally expect. So what's this all about?
- I want to, over the next few minutes, to think about Matthew's account of the journey of the Magi in three separate ways. We're going to start with an overview.
- What is the big picture that Matthew is presenting to us? We'll then dig a bit deeper into the narrative and ask questions about the different things which are unusual or perhaps a bit difficult for us.
- And then we'll end by saying, well, what's the relevance to us today? Why should we be interested in this beyond that it's a good story? So first we're going to look at two keys to understanding Matthew's Gospel and particularly in understanding this passage.
- The big picture of Matthew, the first key, is that the promised Messiah has come. Matthew in many ways forms a bridge between the Old Testament of the Bible and the New Testament.

[3 : 31] The Old Testament ends about 400 years before Jesus was born with the prophecy of Malachi. But as Matthew picks up the story, it's very much with the message, this is a continuation of what's gone before.

What was promised in the Old Testament has now happened. The Messiah has arrived. And Matthew is full of references back to the Old Testament, explaining to us how what Jesus did and who he was tied in perfectly with what had been prophesied then.

It was all part of God's eternal plan. But he then goes a bit beyond that. Because Matthew says, yes, the promised Messiah has come, but he's come to be the saviour of the world.

In the Old Testament, by and large, we read about how God dealt with his people, his chosen people, Israel, the Jews. But come the New Testament and the good news that God brings has been spread beyond the Jews, Jesus has come to be the saviour of the whole world.

And so among the first people to greet the infant Jesus were these Gentiles, non-Jews, who travelled a long way to find him. At the end of Matthew, Jesus sends his disciples.

[4 : 58] He says, go and make disciples of all nations. So at the start, the representatives of the world come to Jesus. At the end, Jesus sends his representatives into the world.

And the great truth is that the message of the Bible, the message of the gospel of Jesus is for everyone. Anyone who is willing to accept and believe is welcomed into God's family through Jesus and can have the joy of Christmas.

The second key to understanding Matthew and this passage is what we got in the sketch earlier on. It is that Jesus is the real king.

The young people were spot on with the drama. The word king occurs 74 times in Matthew's gospel. That's more than two and a half times per chapter.

Craig explained to us a couple of weeks ago about how the genealogy in Matthew 1 points us to the fact that Jesus was the true descendant of King David, the true successor of David as king.

[6 : 09] And in our passage today, Matthew contrasts the real king, Jesus, with the upstart Herod. And he also signals that while he was recognized by these Gentiles, these non-Jews who came to him, he was rejected by the Jews.

The religious leaders seem pretty apathetic about his coming. Herod is positively hostile. If we go again to the end of Matthew's gospel.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross when he was crucified, the Gentile Roman soldiers put a sign above his head that says, Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.

And the Jewish religious leaders pointed at that and mocked and said, well, if you're the king of the Jews, come down from your cross and we will believe. Again, it's the Gentiles that proclaim Jesus as king.

It's his own people, the Jews who reject him. So the big picture here, the big picture of this passage is that the promised Messiah has been born to be king.

[7 : 20] He's recognized by Gentiles, by non-Jews, but he's rejected by the Jewish establishment. John in his gospel puts it like this.

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

So that's the big picture. And let's drill down a bit into the detail and the journey of the Magi as they came to Jesus. So in verses 1 and 2, we have these men, almost certainly men, who have seen a star and have traveled to Jerusalem from the east.

So who are they and what is the star? They're sometimes called wise men, which is, I think, accurate. And they're sometimes called kings, which, as we've heard earlier, is inaccurate.

But it's probably best to stick with the original word, which is transliterated straight from the original language into English, magi. The Bible only tells us they came from the east.

[8 : 30] Most likely they were from modern day Iran or Iraq. Quite possibly from the area around Babylon, where the Jews had been exiled and where many stayed after Ezra, Nehemiah and others returned to Jerusalem.

And in that area, there would be some knowledge of biblical prophecies. People would read accounts of the Old Testament and have some understanding of them.

Magi were religious figures. We might think of them as priests rather than as kings. They used a mixture of astrology, of interpreting dreams, and of consulting scholarly research to make wise pronouncements and to some extent to seek to predict the future.

Although they weren't royal, they would be people with quite a lot of prestige, probably quite wealthy, of a high social status. As a side, we don't know how many of them there were.

The Bible doesn't tell us that there were three. But they actually probably came with a bit of a caravan with others alongside them as a group to Bethlehem. We might consider them in some ways to be a bit misguided in the way they sought God's truth.

[9 : 49] But they do seem to have been sincere searchers after truth. And that's evidenced by the fact that they set out on their journey measured in months rather than days. And were willing to undergo all the rigors of that to see the new king.

So what do we make of the star then? There are all sorts of theories in the recession, if you want to, about known astronomical events around the time of the birth of Jesus.

But it could well have been that this was a special light put in the star by God for this specific purpose. After all, it appeared in the east, seems to have then disappeared.

They didn't follow the star to Jerusalem as far as we can make out. But then it reappeared and guided them very specifically from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. One thing that's worth noting about that is that there was a common understanding in the Middle East around that time that a king was due to be born in Judea.

And the Magi could well have been looking for a sign of that, that expected event. And when an unexpected star appeared in the sky, they took that as a sign from God that the king had indeed come.

[11 : 05] Now in all this, God moves as he does in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. And maybe we shouldn't ask too many questions about the detail.

But the men came from the east. They were searching for a king. And then they have the encounters in Jerusalem. And I've labeled these disturbing.

Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem was disturbed. Perhaps what made Jerusalem disturbed was the fact that they knew what Herod was like.

And they knew what his reaction was likely to be when he was told that there was a new king that had been born for the Jews. There are several Herods mentioned in the New Testament.

The one that we're looking at today is quite often called Herod the Great. Herod the Great because he ruled the whole region, Galilee, Judea, Samaria, and their surrounding parts for around 34 years.

[12 : 04] And after he died, his kingdom was split into four. So he was by far the most powerful of the several Herods that we read about in the Bible. He survived so long because he was very good at maintaining good relationships with Rome.

He was put in place by the Romans and he was very careful not to upset them. He was a great builder. Among other things, he built the magnificent temple in Jerusalem.

But he was of Arab rather than Jewish descent. And so he was the legitimate king in the line of David. He was also a very cruel tyrant.

And he was absolutely paranoid about threats to dethrone him. So, for example, he went to the extent of killing his wife and two of his sons because he was concerned they might be plotting against him.

So it's entirely predictable that this Herod would respond badly to news of a new king. Maybe that's why he speaks to the Magi privately.

[13 : 08] No one who knew him would really believe that he was going to go to Bethlehem to worship the new baby. They would understand what his intentions were.

But he seems to have taken in the Magi. They believed him at that stage until later they were warned about it. And they took him at his word as they went to Bethlehem.

The other thing that's quite striking here is the response of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They're given this problem by Herod. Where is the king to be born?

They come up with the answer that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Absolutely right. But it doesn't seem to have any impact on them.

They're not thinking, this is magnificent. The prophecy of Micah has come about. We must go and see this new king. They appear to be unmoved by it.

[14 : 04] And we'll come back to that in a few minutes. Let's move on now to the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem.

Bethlehem, rather. As they leave Jerusalem, the star they'd seen in the east when it rose, it reappears to them and leads them to what is over exactly the place where Jesus is.

Not now a stable or a place where animals would feed. They seem to be in a house. This is probably after a couple of years, after the birth of Jesus. So Jesus, as they meet him, would be a toddler rather than a baby lying in a crib.

And when they get there, they worship him. Now we need to be careful about not reading too much into the actions of the wise men. Maybe they were worshipping him more paying homage to a king than thinking that he was God.

Although if Mary and Joseph had explained some of the events leading up to the birth of Jesus and following it, then the wise men, the Magi, may have come to understand a bit more.

[15 : 12] But they give him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And they probably saw these as gifts fit for a king. We maybe shouldn't read too much more into their intentions than that.

But again, I don't see anything wrong in us thinking that God may have been this, may have been directing their thoughts, guiding their decisions. And it's often commented on that gold could represent Christ's status as king.

Frankincense could reflect the fact that he's God. Frankincense was burned in the temple. And the myrrh foreshadowed his death. It was a fluid used in embalming.

So entirely appropriate gifts to bring Jesus. In the immediate context, though, the great value of these gifts would have been when the family flee to Egypt and they need a means of support.

Well, they've got it now in the gifts of the wise men. So finally, let's have a think about what this means for us today.

[16 : 19] What's the relevance of this story from long ago and far away to us in 21st century Scotland? Is it just a nice Christmas story or does it have more to say to us?

I think it does. It talks about three different reactions to Jesus. We'll find out more from Graham Dodds next week when we look at the following verses.

But Herod very much sees Jesus as a threat to be eliminated. He sees a potential challenge to his authority. He knows that he is a bit of an upstart as the king, that he's not got the heritage to be the king of the Jews.

But he values his status and his wealth and he doesn't want anyone to threaten it. And if there's a potential challenge to his authority, he wants to get rid of it.

Now, hopefully people wouldn't commit genocide today for that reason. But there are plenty who are opposed to Jesus and to those who follow him.

[17 : 22] They see Jesus as a threat to their beliefs, their values, their lifestyles. And perhaps they're right. Jesus came to change lives.

And if we owe him, if we accept him as king, we owe him our allegiance and our obedience. But first of all, he offers us forgiveness for all the wrong in our lives and assurance of our eternal security, not because of any good things that we are or that we have done, but simply through faith in him and the fact that he died for us on the cross.

If you've been resisting Jesus, perhaps hostile to him, please consider what we learned from the Christmas story and indeed the rest of the life of Jesus and the opportunity he gives you to change your life, to make it so much better and give you real hope for the future.

The second reaction seems to be that Jesus was an irrelevance to be ignored. The chief priests and teachers of the law, as I said, you'd expect them to be excited about the Messiah that had arrived on this wonderful fulfillment of prophecy.

But they just seem to have been indifferent. There's no evidence that anyone else was interested in making the journey along with the Magi to Bethlehem.

[18 : 52] This may be a little unfair, but they appear to have about as much emotion as a chatbot using AI to answer a difficult question.

We've examined our sources and they say the answer is Bethlehem. And that's it. No evidence that they wanted to do anything except give Herod the right answer.

Now, later on, the religious leaders would very much be opposed to Jesus and would turn against him. But to begin with, they seem to have been indifferent, perhaps partly out of fear of Herod, but perhaps also they just weren't that interested.

I guess that's like a lot of people today. They're not opposed to Christianity. They perhaps believe in Jesus as a real historical person who made some great pronouncements, but he doesn't mean anything to them.

He is someone who lived in a faraway country over 2,000 years ago, and they don't see how he can make any difference in their lives. Perhaps I could also say that there can be a lot of indifference among those who would call themselves Christians.

[20 : 09] Like the Jewish religious leaders, we would say we have faith in God, we know the Bible, we do our religious duty, but does it really move us?

Have we lost, if we ever had it, the excitement of knowing Jesus and coming into a relationship with the creator of the universe? Maybe we don't rejoice in him particularly.

We see all the trappings of Christmas and we enjoy that, but our joy isn't really in the coming of the Messiah. Maybe we no longer truly worship him with our lives.

And maybe it's time for us to return again to the baby of Bethlehem and marvel at the mystery of God with us. Indifference to Jesus is an illogical reaction.

He doesn't give us that option. Either we believe in him and allow him to change our lives, or we reject him and face the consequences of that.

[21 : 14] C.S. Lewis said, you can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon. Or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.

But let us not come out with any patronizing nonsense about him being a great human teacher. He's not left that open to us.

So if today you're indifferent to Jesus, if you just see him as some kind of historical character of some interest, but not really relevant today, consider these words.

Consider what the Bible tells us about him. And recognize you either have to choose to accept him, or effectively you're rejecting him. If we reject him, there are eternal consequences.

If we accept him, we will have eternal salvation. And then finally, there's the response of the Magi.

[22 : 11] They see him as a saviour, as a king to be worshipped. What they did, I think, is quite remarkable. Based only on their sighting of a star, they trekked hundreds of miles through difficult and dangerous terrain to see a new king.

And what did they see? They saw a toddler, a young child. They didn't witness Jesus' miracles. They didn't hear his teaching.

And yet they were filled with joy that they had seen the one who had come from God. They presented to him wonderful gifts.

They worshipped him. That's a great response for us too, isn't it? To rejoice in Jesus. To give him the best that we have.

To worship him. And how much more reason do we have than the Magi to do that? We know so much more about Jesus and why he came into the world.

[23 : 19] We know about his amazing miracles, about the godly power that he showed throughout his life. We can read his marvellous teaching and see in it God speaking to us and addressing us in our situations and challenging us about our thoughts and our actions as well as encouraging us in times of difficulty.

And above all, if we've accepted Jesus as our saviour, we have forgiveness for all the wrong we've done. We have new life through his death and his resurrection.

How can we not join the Magi, the wise men, in falling down and worshipping him? As hymn writer says, Jesus is king and I will extol him.

Give him the glory and honour his name. He reigns on high and throned in the heavens. Word of the Father, exalted for us.

I started by saying that Matthew's account of the nativity is gritty. And in many ways, it is. But it's also wonderful.

[24 : 33] Wonderful that Joseph received the message that the child that was being born was the Son of God conceived by the Holy Spirit. Wonderful that we are presented with the real king and with those who travel a great distance to come and to worship him.

Wonderful, as we'll see next week, in the way that God preserved the life of his son and of Mary and Joseph as they were under threat through Herod.

It's the story of the real king and its hope for the world. It's God with us. God living our life. God dying at our death and rising from the dead so that we too can one day be raised to be with him.

And that's the great hope that Christmas gives us. That's the great joy that we should have. That because a saviour came on that first Christmas, we have a real hope for the future, a knowledge that one day we will go to be with him and our joy will be complete as we spend eternity worshipping him.

And let's do that this Christmas. Let's worship the baby who came to Bethlehem, the one who is now seated at God's right hand, having finished the work that he came to earth to do, having completely done everything, we need to be restored to God.

[26 : 02] Let me pray. Father, we thank you for the wonder of Christmas, the wonder that God himself came into the world through your son to be our saviour.

We thank you that that is a source of great joy, even amid all the difficult events that we read about in Matthew. And we thank you that for us it can be a source of great joy this Christmas as we reflect on all that the Lord Jesus has done and all that we have in him.

If we have doubts, we pray that you will remove these doubts and help us to understand exactly who Jesus is. If we have been opposed to him, please remove that and through your spirit draw us to know and to love him.

And if we've been indifferent, please help us to understand that that's not the right way to be, that we need to seriously consider the claims of Jesus and who he is.

We thank you for this time this morning. We thank you for the privilege of meeting, to think about you, to worship, to learn from you. And we now commit ourselves to you in the name of the Lord Jesus.

[27 : 19] Amen.