

The Promised Shepherd King

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[0 : 00] Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

[1 : 18] For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, 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 shepherd my people Israel.

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go, and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him.

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose, went before them, until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly, with great joy.

And going into the house, they saw the child, with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

[2 : 35] And, being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Thank you, Simon. Thank you, Simon. Well, good morning.

And we're going to spend a bit of time now thinking about that turning point of history, that Christmas story, which Simon read for us earlier. I wonder what your memory of school nativity plays are.

Perhaps you've been at one very recently. Perhaps you've been at one this week. Or perhaps they are a very distant memory. For me, it's quite vivid, and only slightly embarrassing.

I remember being in a silk dressing gown, and a really awful green hat that smelled, that would have perhaps been suitable on the head, of a great aunt at a wedding.

But those primary school nativity scenes are often all we think about when we think about the real Christmas, and the real Christmas story. It's often all we take away, all we think about, if we think about it at all.

[3 : 43] But in our second reading this morning that Simon read from Matthew chapter 2, that is not the picture that is being painted. Indeed, if Matthew had written the script, I would have had no place in the nativity at all.

Instead, in what we read, Matthew is presenting us with the real Jesus. The real Jesus of the real gospel.

Matthew's already given us some details of before the birth. He's shown us that Jesus really is a royal. He comes in the family line of King David. And he's also shown us that Jesus really is God.

He shall be called Emmanuel, God with us. But just one verse is all the detail we get about that night in the stable when the Son of God was born as a human baby.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king. One verse about the night that we all focus on. And we jump immediately from that night to some point in the first couple of years of Jesus' life to see the visit of the wise men.

[4 : 59] And we do this because the significance of the birth is not just in the night itself, but in its implications for each and every human being who's ever lived.

For you and for me. You see, through this visit, Matthew is showing us more of the real Jesus. And he's showing us that. And here's our first point.

Jesus is the shepherd king come to lead his people. Verse one of the passage, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. We get no details of their name, none of their homeland or their background, or even whether there was three of them or a hundred of them, as lovely as the song is.

And that's kind of the point because it matters very little who they were. The point that we need to see is their action and the reaction which they caused.

They come from the east to Jerusalem and ask, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. You can imagine these wise men arriving through the gates of Jerusalem and stopping to ask at every door.

[6 : 10] And Herod's guards get wind and they rush up to Herod and they tell him, these men have arrived and they're asking where the king of the Jews is. But there's really, there's great irony here because these are Gentile, non-Jewish wise men who have come to Jerusalem, the city of the Jews, to ask where the king of the Jews is.

But he's not there. And we'll see the reaction to that shortly. But for now, let's hear the message that the wise men bring. The king of the Jews has been born.

The wise men bring good news. You see, God's people have for hundreds and hundreds of years been waiting, been waiting for the anointed one, God's chosen shepherd king, to come and to lead his people.

Promised by prophets, the longed for king had apparently now been born. The ruler who would come and shepherd God's people, lead them rightly and truly, lead them away from death and destruction, and into life, eternal life with him.

The good shepherd, the only shepherd who can save from death. And this, and so much more, was in this king of the Jews figure, a king, God himself, come to rule and lead his people.

[7 : 38] But you see, the reality has always been that wherever the gospel came, that's whenever God brought good news to his people, conflict and tension arose. And that's what we see in the following verses in the passage.

We see that Jesus is the shepherd king, but he's opposed by those who should have welcomed him. Opposed by those who should have welcomed him. When Herod the king hears the news, he gathers all the chief priests and the scribes of the people.

These are the religious leaders, the learned ones, the ones with PhDs in theology, the ones who look very busy doing religious things. And Herod asks them where the Christ, God's shepherd king, is to be born.

And without much hesitation or deliberation, they turn to the prophet Micah. Because they know that Micah said that it is from Bethlehem that the Christ would come.

But their answer to Herod is not one filled with joy or inquisitiveness or any interest. No, Herod, the religious leaders and the whole city of Jerusalem are troubled.

[8 : 50] The religious leaders had all the orthodoxy, they knew what was true, but that truth never seems to have gone into their hearts. They had no interest in it, no desire to follow it up.

No, the shepherd king has come to lead his people. Hundreds of years of waiting, of God's people facing real and great oppression, failing to live rightly before God.

And now the king finally has come, but his people stand troubled and far off. I wonder, can that response not sometimes be ours as well, having everything together on the outside, looking very religious, doing religious things, but having no real desire to be with Jesus at all.

Happy instead with a religious show of our own making and our own satisfaction. You know, we must be very careful that we're not like that.

At Christmas, as we read the Christmas story, as we read of the star that pointed to the Christ, are we drawn to him and to his people?

[10 : 01] Or are we just going through some kind of religious motion? Well, that was the response of religious Israel, apathy, which was really rejection. But we also see here the response of outright hatred, because it's Herod who's brought the religious leaders together, because he is troubled.

Troubled very likely about what this birth means for his own kingship, for his own power. Having understood from the religious leaders that it was in Bethlehem that the Christ was to be born, he summons secretly the wise men.

Herod does not want fanfare. He wants to keep things quiet. So perhaps no one will know or find out or ask questions about what's really happened. Meanwhile, in the very same verse, God has made a star appear in the sky.

God shouting loudly from the heavens that here, here is the spot where the Christ, God's shepherd king is. Come, come and see. See, Herod says, go and find the child.

Work hard to find the child. And when you do, let me know so that I too may come and worship him. But Herod has no real interest at all in worshipping Jesus.

[11 : 20] At the end of the passage, we read that God sends a message to the wise men not to return to Herod. See, having been tricked by the wise men, Herod orders that all male children under two years old in Israel are to be killed.

Herod has moved from being troubled to plotting mass murder. Herod, the man with armies and resources at his disposal, is threatened by a baby.

Earlier, in the Bible, we read that the kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed.

And so it is here. King Herod is set against the Lord. And against his anointed, Jesus. He's insecure and weak in the face of God.

Herod totally rejected Jesus. He had total hatred towards God and towards his anointed. And I think that attitude is alive today.

[12 : 30] People loudly and proudly and people quietly and secretly opposing God and his people. So we see the apparent apathy of religious Israel and the outright hatred of King Herod.

But both these responses ultimately lead to the same end because they reject God. They reject the message of Christmas. But while Herod started killing Jesus, the baby who he was targeting, was safely out the country with his parents in Egypt because God is sovereign and God will protect his king.

And Herod's future gets just half a verse later in the chapter. Herod died. Herod's end is destruction. And so it is ultimately for all those who reject and oppose Jesus.

Now you see that the news that Matthew is announcing as he starts his gospel is that God's shepherd king has come. Come to lead his people. And the question that Matthew is posing is what will you do with the real Jesus?

God's shepherd king. Perhaps you've been in and around church all your life. You've got some of the privilege like religious Israel do here of knowing the promises of God, of knowing what God has said to his people.

[14 : 01] Well the message here is clear. Don't neglect that. Don't disregard it. No, you too need to come to the shepherd king. But Matthew he doesn't leave us wondering how to come.

No, he shows us with the visit of the wise men to the infant Christ how we must respond. And so finally we see that Jesus is the shepherd king welcomed by those we would not expect.

The wise men are sent by Herod to Bethlehem to find the baby. But it's not Herod's instruction which they follow. No, it's the star which they follow. God himself setting the direction to his Christ.

And the star comes and rests over the place where Jesus is. Verse 10 if you've got it in front of you is remarkable because when news of the star and the birth came to Jerusalem people were troubled but here the sight of the star causes the wise men to rejoice exceedingly with great joy.

These wise men from the east almost certainly have no Jewish family no link to God's people none of the privilege and the knowledge of religious Israel.

[15 : 20] They didn't have the land and the temple and the prophets that they could turn to. And yet when they see the star shining in the sky they know to come and to worship the newborn king.

It was likely the case that they had some benefit perhaps of hearing some of the promises of God second hand from some Israelites of knowing something of God's promise of saving.

And it was almost certainly the case that they knew that they needed saving because they perhaps just like us know that the world isn't right. And perhaps the biggest evidence of this for them was the existence of death.

And I think it is the same for us now because God had promised through his prophets that his shepherd king would come and destroy death forever. And so these wise men, these people from outside Israel, outside the church, come and they go into the house, and find the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Having travelled for many days and probably being completely bewildered by the response they got in Jerusalem, they arrive and they fall down on their knees in worship of the king.

[16 : 44] And they bring great gifts too. The gifts that they bring are an expression of their worship, their wholehearted worship, giving their all to Christ. They had none of the religious background or behaviour.

You see, it's possible to have all that and to never actually come to the Christ like those in Jerusalem. It's possible to spend years in and around the church, even serving in the church, without actually ever coming in worship, giving your heart to Jesus.

Now, in this chapter, it's the Gentile wise men who show us how to react to the birth of Jesus and to the message of Christmas. No matter who you are, where you're from, what you've done, come, come and worship the newborn king.

If you're here and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then that is Matthew's message to you. For Jesus is the shepherd king, come to lead his people.

And he is gathering that people from places that we would least expect, wise men from the east, outside Israel, outside God's people, outside the church, come and worship.

[18 : 01] And people are still drawn to Jesus today, drawn perhaps by a star shining. Jesus will tell his people later in Matthew's gospel that they, they are the light of the world, a light shining to bring people, to draw people to God.

And God draws these wise men by second hand witness to his promises and by the star. And he draws them to come to the infant Christ.

And they come and behold him firsthand. No longer hearing from others, but seeing, hearing, and believing for themselves.

Perhaps maybe here this morning in a church you feel out of place, like church isn't quite for you. Well, the message here is clear, there's no such thinking from God. These wise men come from nowhere and become part of God's people.

You can too, wherever you're from, whatever you've done, whatever background you have. because ultimately we all react to the Christmas story.

[19 : 17] Some leave it at the school missivity and think about it no more. But others are drawn to come, come and find out about Christ, God's shepherd king, to come and be led by him for themselves.

The shepherd king who Matthew will tell us will go on to take his crown, a crown of thorns, and ascend to his throne, a cross, to lead his people and to destroy death forever.

You see, the message of Christmas is that the promised shepherd king has come, and the only right response is to fall down and worship. Because apathy, rejection, and hatred have only one end.

But life, new and eternal life, is to be found only in falling down in worship of the Christ. So this Christmas, don't stop at the school nativity play.

Don't see the star, hear the message, hear the music, and ignore it, or just go through the motions. But come, come perhaps even for the very first time, and fall in wholehearted worship to the Christ, God's shepherd king.

[20 : 44] We're going to pray together now. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Father, cause us this Christmas to worship the shepherd king, the shepherd king, Jesus Christ, who brings light and life.

he was born so that man no more may die. Father, we pray that you would guide us by your light to your son, and cause us to fall down in worship of him.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.