

Jesus came to trouble the genocidal despot (Lunchtime Carols)

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Preacher: Andy Ritson

[0 : 00] Thank you.

Amen. Well, good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime carol service here at the Tron.

It's really lovely to have you all with us. Just a few things before we begin. With it being a carol service, the service will be slightly longer this afternoon than usual, and we will be having mince pies at the end as well.

But we do recognize that some of you might need to nip off back to work, and we just want you to know that don't feel any embarrassment about having to get up at any point in the service and having to leave.

It's absolutely fine. We're just really glad to have you here with us. But we're going to kick off our service today by singing our first carol, Joy to the World, which reminds us to joyfully receive our King.

[1 : 45] So let's sing together. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Let us pray to you in this wager.

Let us speak to you in this wager.

Ecclesi TWO Well, our reading for today comes from Matthew's Gospel, and it can be found in chapter 2 on page 807.

[4 : 22] And we're reading from verses 1 through to verse 23. 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?

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 scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 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.

[6 : 11] 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, that Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Out of Egypt I called my son. Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

[7 : 36] Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children.

She refused to be comforted, because they are no more. But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.

And he rose, and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea, in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled.

He shall be called a Nazarene. Christmas can be a fraught time of year, can't it?

[8 : 46] It's full of divisions. Family relationships are often stretched to breaking point on Christmas Day. Siblings battle it out, armed with forks over that last pig in blanket, on the Christmas table.

Emotions run high, when a family member doesn't prepare that, oh, I'm ever so thankful and appreciative face, just in the nick of time, when opening and Irene's present.

And we find ourselves, time and time again, holding our tongues, when we're trying to bear with our awkward family member, who keeps making barbed comment after barbed comment.

We often make out as if Christmas is a time of great unity. But I think we all know that that unity is often just skin deep. We plaster over the cracks with platitudes and good intentions to behave well this year with our family.

But we all know that there are often massive fault lines underneath the surface. Massive divisions. And surprisingly, this kind of Christmas, the divisive Christmas, the one we try and hide behind pain and smiles, is more in keeping with the Christmas story we find here in Matthew 2, than perhaps Christmas stories we see depicted on Christmas cards or in Hollywood.

[10 : 12] In this passage, we do read of great warmth and gladness and joy, but there's also a whole lot of anger, envy, and strife, as Jesus reveals a deep rift that has always fractured and divided our world.

Now, this great divide that Jesus exposes isn't based on what side of a family argument you find yourselves on, or what team you find yourself in when playing Christmas party games.

No, it's a divide that is far more serious than that, and far more offensive than that too. Jesus' coming into the world brings all of us, all humanity, into the light and reveals what side of the great war we are on, like we were looking at last week in Revelation chapter 12.

Are we on the side of Jesus? Are we the seed of the woman? Those eagerly longing for Jesus to appear in our world so that we might worship him?

Or are we the seed of the serpent? Those who reject Jesus and his claims because we want to be king ourselves. Jesus' birth into the world reveals what side we are on.

[11 : 33] And that can be deeply offensive, can't it? For nobody in the seed of the serpent camp wants to be described in that way, do they?

Most people would say their rejection of Jesus and his claims to be God are based on different grounds entirely. Perhaps my assessment of the evidence, perhaps the track record of the church being so bad.

But Jesus says undergirding all those ideas is a motivation to defront Jesus and pretend that we are king in his place.

And we see that in our passage this afternoon. But before we get to that, let's first look at the response of the wise men who raise this question for us.

Will you treasure Jesus and seek him out? Pick up the story with me in verse one. 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?

[12 : 47] For we saw his star when it rose and we have come to worship him. Now, we're not told a great deal about these wise men.

We don't have any idea where they are from. After all, the east is a pretty big place. We don't know how many of them there were. Tradition tells us there were three.

That's just based on the number of gifts that they brought Jesus. It's all conjecture. There could have been anything, any number from two to 2,000 of them. And we don't even know if they came on camels or not, despite what our wooden nativity scenes tell us.

But we're not told any of this information for one reason. None of it matters. What does matter, though, is these three things.

That they searched for Jesus, they knew him to be the king of the Jews, and they wanted to worship him. Now, you might wonder why some magi from possibly hundreds of miles away made the effort to come to Israel.

[13:56] Why did they go on this trip? Why were they so interested in the king of the Jews? After all, they might well have been Babylonian or Persian. We just don't know.

So why would they be interested in the king of a little country, Israel? Well, presumably, these men were God-fearers and knew the significance of this child, that the coming of this promised king to Israel wasn't just good news for the Jews, but indeed for the whole world.

Many prophecies in the Old Testament made that very clear indeed. So they arrive in Jerusalem and turn up at the palace, verse 1. Surely, the child who has been born king of the Jews would be born here of all places.

But no. Instead, they're met with a very troubled king, King Herod, verse 3. There's no sign of the child at all.

But the search isn't over. Herod gathers his chief priests and scribes and ascertains where this promised child would be born. They consult the Old Testament.

[15:10] In verse 5, the chief priests inform Herod that this child was to be born in Bethlehem, for that was what was prophesied by the prophet Micah hundreds of years ago.

That prophecy which is quoted here in verse 6, that the one who would shepherd Israel, be the ruler, would come from this place, Bethlehem. And then Herod summons the wise men to find out when the star rose, verse 7.

More on that later, for he's been rather deceptive and slimy at this point. And sends the wise men on their way to find the child and asks them to return to him when they find him, so he too may worship him.

Well, the star rests over the place where the child was. And verse 10, the wise men are filled with rejoicing and excitement. They have so longed for this moment.

And now, the moment is finally here. These men no doubt knew the Hebrew Old Testament and had studied it as well as their scientific practices and had come to trust the words of the Hebrew Scriptures to be divine and trustworthy and thus trusted the promises that were made about this infant child they were just about to meet.

[16:34] That he would rule the nations, bring about peace to this broken world that we inhabit. Put an end to all evil. Make all wrongs right.

And bring great blessing to all those who bow the knee to him. And thus, it's unsurprising, isn't it, what they do in verse 11.

Then, 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.

They recognize him as the promised king, and they worship him. They bestow upon him this child born in obscurity, this child who will soon be made a refugee, a child who will be hunted, gifts worthy of the greatest of kings.

When these men were confronted with the coming of Jesus into the world, they're shown to be of the seed of the woman, the people of faith, those who long for his appearing.

[17:45] But the only way of knowing whether you are the people of faith is to act in the way that these wise men do. They hear of Jesus and the claims attached to him in the scriptures, and they instantly seek him out.

Who knows what lengths they went to in order to find him. And when they do find him, they worship him and honor him as king.

And that's the only way today, also, of knowing whether you're on the right side or not, whether you're the seed of the woman, is how you respond to Jesus and his coming.

You can't search for him like the wise men did. He isn't here in flesh anymore. He's ascended into heaven, and he reigns there, ready to return, and settle the battle once and for all, and heal this fractured world.

But you can still search for him in the scriptures, like the wise men no doubt did before embarking on this trip. You can read of the promises made about him, and you can meet him through the

eyewitness accounts of the gospels.

[18 : 56] And if Jesus represented in the gospels, these eyewitness accounts, really does match up with what we find in the Old Testament promises, if he really is shown to be the one who could finally bring an end to all the things that we hate in this world, and bring us to God, then I think you'll agree.

The only appropriate way to respond to him is to do as the wise men did. So, bow the knee to him, and honor him as king, and give him all that you have.

So, can I encourage you to do that this Christmas, to search for him, search the scriptures, see if he really is the promised king he claims to be, and if he is, honor him as you ought to.

Well, we're going to take a break now, and sing another carol, and we're going to sing the carol, Angels from the Realms of Glory, which encourages us to seek and worship Jesus, just like the wise men did.

So, please do rise and sing after the musicians have played the introduction for us. We're going to sing the carol, because the Lord built in the title of the church with the church with the church with the Thank you.

[21 : 12] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[23 : 42] Thank you.

Will you be troubled by Jesus and try to stamp him out? For the answer to that question is yes.

Well, you find yourself in very bad company indeed, alongside Herod.

And you show yourself to be on the wrong side of this war that we looked at over the last couple of weeks between the serpent and the woman. The serpent who deceives the world into following him and fighting for him against Jesus and his followers who will one day finally be judged and made no more when Jesus returns.

It's very chilling to think that you might be on that side. Notice verse 3, Herod's response to the news that a child has been born who is king of the Jews.

He was troubled, as were all Jerusalem with him, we're told. Now that is a surprise, isn't it? For the prophets promised only good things to happen when God's promised king, the Messiah, would come, would step into world history.

[25 : 28] We've talked about some of those things already, some of the things that were promised. But ultimately, there would be a great turnaround in the fortunes of God's people who had been oppressed for years.

The promised king would deal with all God's enemies and make God's people prosper again. So why was both Herod and the people in Jerusalem troubled at the news of the king of the Jews' coming?

Well, the answer is that they did not belong to the seed of the woman, but rather to the seed of the serpent.

They weren't people who loved God and longed for the coming of his promised king, but were troubled because they deemed this promised king a great threat to them. King Herod was not a Jew.

In fact, he was Edomite. He was a descendant of the Edomites, who were in turn a descendant of Esau, the brother of Jacob, the great opponent of God's people.

[26 : 38] The Edomites had harassed God's people all throughout history. And the people of Jerusalem, well, some of them will have been genuine believers, genuine Jews, longing for Jesus' coming.

But the vast majority of themselves show themselves to be enemies of God too. In fact, in the Gospels, when Jesus talks to those in Jerusalem, he says that they may think themselves the children of Abraham, the seed of the woman, those who are heirs of the promise on the good side. But in reality, they're the seed of the serpent. They have a very different father indeed. Their father is the devil. And for those who are enemies of God, the coming of Jesus into the world is utterly threatening.

For up until that moment when Jesus confronts them with his coming, well, things seem to be going rather well for them. It doesn't look like God is really in control of the universe.

It looks like anything goes. You can do what you like. For it appears like the devil is on top and anarchy rules. But with the coming of this infant child, well, the tide turns.

[27 : 56] And that's why Herod wants to stamp him out. And in his attempt to do so, to stamp him out, he shows his true family likeness. He's described in ways that are in keeping with how the great dragon, that serpent, the devil, was described in last week's passage in Revelation 12.

Firstly, he's described as being a deceiver. In verse 7, he pretends that his intentions are to worship this child when speaking to the wise men.

But in reality, all he wants to do is draw information out of them that will aid him in his quest to put an end to this promised king. He ascertains the time when the child was born and then tries to convince the wise men to reveal the whereabouts of this promised child that he might have him killed.

And when the wise men return in verse 16, well, he becomes utterly furious. He shows himself to be a murderer, just like the great dragon last week.

In fact, he becomes genocidal. Such is his fury against this promised child, this promised king, the threat that he poses to his autonomy, that he would have every child in the region of Bethlehem murdered who are under the age of two years old.

[29 : 27] It's abhorrent behavior. The thought of it fills us with horror. As a parent of a one-year-old boy, the thought of living in that region at that time is absolutely blood-curdling.

I can't imagine the terror those parents went through because of Herod's actions. But yet the truth is, the capacity for such behavior is present within every human heart that doesn't acknowledge Jesus as king.

We don't see it all that often because people hide their hatred of Jesus behind pleasant smiles and good manners. But Jesus threatens people to such an extent that they really do want to exterminate all mention of him at all cost.

But Jesus is the ultimate threat to every human being's personal autonomy. If Jesus is king, then we can't con ourselves into thinking that we're in control of our own lives and that we can do whatever we want.

If Jesus is king, then we really do have to answer to him. I'm not a free agent after all. I'm accountable to someone. I have to give an answer to how I live my life.

[30 : 54] And that is troubling indeed. It goes against absolutely everything that the world tells us. That we're free, that we can do what we want.

That what we do doesn't really matter. I was chatting to a lady the other day who I've spoken to numerous times before, but I don't know her all that well.

She was asking me about my job and what I do and really just been quite pleasant and showing an interest in me. I thought that was rather nice. But when I mentioned that my job was to tell people about Jesus, well, she didn't become murderous like Herod, but her tone certainly changed.

She was still pleasant, still very polite, but you could tell that the walls went up. It was like the mentioning of Jesus' name triggered an automatic high-tech security system that was engaged to keep all mention of his name out.

Don't let him in. Don't engage with him. I don't want anything to do with him. Have you ever experienced that before when talking to people? And you have to ask, don't you, why do people behave like that when they come across Jesus?

[32 : 15] If Jesus promises such marvelous things, a renewed world, a restored relationship with God, our maker, a world of no more lies, no more pain, no more fear, no more death, why does Jesus provoke such a response in people?

Well, the answer is that these promises that he makes are only given to those who are the seed of the woman, those who are the people of faith.

So when King Jesus is mentioned to those who are on the side of the serpent, well, it's no surprise at all that they respond in the way that they do. It isn't irrational how they respond. In fact, it's completely rational to want to silence him and want to pretend like they are actually King and Jesus isn't.

To stamp him out. To keep on pretending like he really isn't who he says he is. Because if you admit that he really is the King, then it's admitting that one day he's going to return, I'm going to

have to answer to him.

And I don't want to do that. But the problem is, Jesus really is the King. And he can't be silenced and he can't be stopped or stamped out.

[33 : 33] And we see that in the warnings that come in this passage through the envisions and the angelic meetings. Verse 12. The wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and give away the coordinates of his promised child.

Verse 13. Joseph is warned by an angel of Herod's intentions of genocide and his desire to kill the child and is told to depart to Egypt.

Verse 19. When Herod is dead, an angel then tells Joseph to return to Israel in a dream. But then he's warned again in verse 22 not to return to Judea.

For Herod's psychopath's son, Archelaus, was now in power. God protects this promised king all the way through his life.

Despite the best efforts of the seed of the serpent, they could not stamp him out. There was no way of derailing God's salvation plan that hung on this infant child.

[34 : 38] God would ensure that his promised king would indeed complete his earthy work and finally take up his rightful throne. And it begs the question, doesn't it?

If he really is the king and he really cannot be stopped, then why am I responding to him the way that I am? Why don't I at least seek him out this Christmas and work out what I really make of him rather than shooting him down at any mention?

Why not take his claims seriously this Christmas and question your own position? For if what God says is true about this infant child born in Bethlehem, then you are in a really high-stakes game indeed.

It really matters whose side you find yourself on. So ask yourself, does it make sense that I have such disdain for Jesus considering how he lived, how he taught, and what he promised?

The answer to that question ought to be no. Unless, of course, you really are subject to the devil's rule like the Bible says you are, that you really have been deceived into fighting for him.

[36 : 02] You may think you're in charge of your life, but the truth is that every man has a master and the Bible says there are only two options. Either your master is the devil who deceives you into fighting for him against Jesus and all those who belong to him who wants you to think that you have absolute autonomy over your life, that you really are king, whereas in reality he is the one who has a hold on you and will betray you at the last.

He's not for you. At the very end of your life when he's done with you, he will betray you. He will accuse you before God, telling him of all your wrongdoing, all your sin against him, and you might face eternal judgment.

That's what life under the rule of a devil's like. Or alternatively, live life under the rule of King Jesus who speaks plainly to us, doesn't he?

Who wants you to share in his victory over evil in the end and enjoy the world that he's bringing in under his good rule where all traces of evil and wrongdoing aren't even a distant memory.

They're forgotten about altogether. So if you haven't sought him like the wise men did, can I encourage you to do that this Christmas?

[37 : 20] we have copies of John's gospel out in the foyer. The people in the doors are more than happy to give that to you. There are a version of John's gospel called Word One-to-One, and they're really built just to go through with a Christian friend.

And there's questions along the way that help you engage with the gospel for yourself and work out what it is actually truly saying. And when it would be wonderful this Christmas if you haven't given him much thought, if you haven't sought him out, to do so, ask a friend to do that with you.

And if you haven't come along with a friend today, then ask someone on the door too. They'll put you in contact with someone who can do that. And if you do do that, if you do engage with the gospel, if you do really engage with this infant child, Jesus, this promised king this Christmas, then I do trust you will come to the same conclusion that the wise men did.

But Jesus is more than worthy of your adoration and praise and worship. Indeed, worthy of the greatest treasures that you can bestow upon him.

Indeed, worthy of your very lives. Let's pray together. Father God, we do thank you so much that you sent Jesus, the promised king, into this world.

[38 : 46] We thank you for all that he promises. But Lord, we do also recognize that this sermon will be an uncomfortable hearing for some here in this room today.

You really do divide humanity. And we pray for those who have found themselves troubled by what's been said, that they wouldn't be put off, that they wouldn't put up the barriers, but they would really engage with what the Bible says about you.

And we do pray, Father, that they'd recognize that we don't speak these hard truths out of wanting to inflict pain upon people or to be cruel.

But we do so because we want them to come and know the Lord Jesus for themselves. And we pray for all of us, Lord, whether we know you are not this Christmas, that we would seek you out and know you more truly, know you better, and hold you out to our friends and family who do not know you.

So help us to do that, we pray, in Jesus' name. Well, we close our service this afternoon by singing our last carol together, Come, O long expected Jesus.

[40 : 00] Born your people to deliver, born a child and yet a king, born to reign in us forever, now the gracious kingdom bring. Let's sing together.

Let's sing together. hand to hand to soon.

To me, Amen. Amen.

Father God, we do pray that you would help to throne anything in our lives that we put before you and help us to see Jesus as he truly is.

As we look upon this infant child at Christmas, we pray that we'd see the promised king. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.