

The Promised Shepherd and Sovereign

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn this morning to our Bible reading and we're working through these opening chats of Matthew in these weeks leading up to Christmas. And last week, we're looking at the second half of chapter one of Matthew.

And this morning, we're looking at the first half of chapter two. So do turn your Bibles to Matthew chapter two. And we'll be reading from verses one to twelve of Matthew chapter two.

Matthew two, 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?

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 in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet.

[1 : 18] And you, O Bethlehem, the land of Judea, 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

[2 : 34] Amen. Amen. May God bless his word to us this morning. Well, please do have Matthew chapter 2 open in front of you.

I'll be a real help as we work through this passage together. So do have that open, please. Now, it can be, I think, quite easy for us to domesticate Christmas, to domesticate and tame the Christmas story.

Amid all the hype, the trees, the lights, the shops, the parties, amid all that, the story, the historical events, the root of it all, do get a look in.

But it's quite a small look in. It's a domesticated look. We see it, don't we, in the nativity plays of primary schools up and down the land. Perhaps it's in a nativity scene in the local shopping center. It's seen as quite a quaint sort of thing, something for the kids. You know, the story, they can have that. But the rest of it will just get lost in the lights and the tinsel and the presents.

[3 : 47] We beam with pride as our children get cast as cow number two. Definitely out the pecking order from sheep number one, but not quite donkey number six.

If you've had kids in the nativity scene, it's quite a political thing, really, where your child ranks in the cast. But anyway, we can get lost in that and sort of misconstrue what it's really all about.

In fact, there's no nativity scene in Matthew's gospel. All you get is the start of chapter two, verse one. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, that's it in terms of the nativity scene.

That's the sort of reports I give to my wife whenever we have a child born in the church. She wants the Luke account, all the details, almost like a musical, all the songs. She wants that account and not the Matthew account.

But there we go. I prefer the Matthew account myself. But the reality, you see, could not be further from the rather neutered nativity with small children dressed up in every sort of animal you can imagine.

[4 : 59] That is a far cry from the reality of what actually happens. The reality is the reality we read about here in Matthew's gospel. And far from being the story limited to a couple called Mary and Joseph who lived in the Middle East, it is a story of cosmic proportions with eternal implications for all of us.

All of us here who are here in person or perhaps watching online. In fact, this story has implications for everybody in our city, everyone in our nation, the whole world.

We saw last week at the end of chapter one that the birth of Jesus Christ, that with that birth, God himself has come to dwell with his people.

But not only that, this baby that was born to Mary is Jesus, God's savior, who has come to rescue his people. This is huge.

If this is true, this is the central moment in all of human history, God himself stepping into the human story. Even if you're not fully persuaded about what we're saying, even if you think it might possibly be true, then surely it's worth further consideration, isn't it?

[6 : 19] If this is actually true, then it's worth investing a bit of extra time and thought. Is this really true? And here at the start of chapter two, Matthew pulls the curtain back a little further to see what's really going on.

And what is going on is absolutely staggering. The child that was born, that was named Jesus, he was the promised king.

He was God's king, God's ruler, God's sovereign, God's shepherd. Since the very beginning, God's purpose in all of creation was to establish his rule over this world that we live in.

That was the task he gave right at the very beginning to Adam and Eve, to extend his kingdom of light over the whole earth. But as the story unfolds, as you read from Genesis 1 and 2 and 3 and onwards, as the story unfolds, there is another kingdom.

A kingdom of darkness with Satan at his head. And since that moment of temptation, there in the Garden of Eden, a battle has raged.

[7 : 36] A cosmic battle between God's kingdom of light and Satan's kingdom of darkness. It is a battle that's been fought all through time in our world.

But at Christmas, with the birth of Jesus Christ, we are witnessing almost like an invasion from on high on enemy-occupied territory.

This is a decisive moment. The kingdom of light breaks out on a dark world. And the king of that kingdom is born a child.

We read about it here in Matthew chapter 2. That's the reality behind what we read of here in chapter 2. It's a far cry, isn't it, from the school nativity play.

There's far more going on here. It is the true story that shapes everything that we see in history. In our world today is shaped by this event. It's the true story that we find fragments of in the stories that we naturally love.

[8 : 39] Lord of the Rings. Chronicles of Narnia. Star Wars, if you're into that sort of thing. Battles between good and evil. The dark side and the Jedi. Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker.

Matthew's getting very excited next to me here. He's a real Star Wars buff. But in Star Wars, it's the good guys that often look small and weak and destined for defeat.

And likewise here with the birth of Jesus. It all looks very unimpressive, unassuming, weak, very everyday. Just another child born in some town nobody's heard of.

But actually, something of cosmic, eternal proportions is happening. That's what Matthew's showing us. The king, God's king, has finally arrived.

So three points this morning as we look at this account from Matthew. First, Jesus' birth proclaims the arrival of the promised sovereign shepherd.

[9 : 37] Jesus' birth proclaims the arrival of the promised sovereign shepherd. We see here, with his birth, the fulfillment of the long-promised shepherd king.

Now, the language of kingship is littered throughout the passage. Just glance down with me. And you'll see it into the narrative. At the very start, pops Herod, the king of Judea.

Verses 1 and 3. The wise men from the east, they come to Jerusalem. They ask, where is he?

Verse 2, who is born king of the Jews.

Look on to verse 6. It speaks of a ruler who will shepherd the people of Israel. And then we see these wise men coming to the child Jesus and worshiping him. Bring him gifts fit for a king. Matthew couldn't be clearer, could he? The king, long promised, has finally arrived. Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the promised sovereign shepherd.

[10:41] Now, look at the start there. Herod is pretty clearly shaken, isn't he, by these wise men who come into his city looking for the king of the Jews.

And so he asks the chief priests and the scribes to look into it. And they refer him to Micah, who spoke these words in verse 6 centuries before.

And he spoke there of a ruler who would truly shepherd his people. That's what you see there at the end of verse 6.

For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. That's what Herod is told. This is what's happening. Now, the shepherding language here can perhaps confuse us a bit and paint an unrealistic picture.

When we hear about a shepherd being promised, we often associate shepherds, don't we, with the sort of nice, gentle, sheep-cuddling sort of chap. You know, the guy you'd see on the TV in the sheepdog competitions with his whistle running up the sheep.

[11:47] You know, the sort of guy with his flat cap and barber jacket and all that kind of thing. But that's a very unhelpful picture of a shepherd. I was speaking some years ago to one of our students. And her family have, for as far back as she could remember, been crofters.

And she was telling me what looking after sheep really involved. And it's tough work. Protecting the sheep from danger. Ensuring they were fed. Out late into the night looking for the lost sheep. Shepherds were a tough lot, she said. Don't think about those nice, cuddly sorts of guys. These were tough men. And that is much closer to what the Bible speaks about when it talks of shepherding in the Bible.

Matthew is quoting here from the prophet Micah. And he's speaking of a promised ruler who would shepherd his people. But not just his people, the whole world. The Bible often describes God as a shepherd.

As a leader of his people. In Psalm 78, it describes God as the one who struck down every firstborn in Egypt.

[12:56] Who led out his people like sheep. And guided them in the wilderness like a flock. You see, God is a shepherd who leads. Who fights. Who protects.

That is what a shepherd is. It's a strong role of protection and leading and feeding. Later in that psalm, we read of the under-shepherds that God has appointed.

It says this. He chose David, his servant. And took him from the sheepfolds. From following the nursing ewes. And brought him to shepherd Jacob, his people.

See, David was God's chosen shepherd king. There's a shepherding language used about David. And it's one of his descendants.

The promised shepherd king that Matthew introduces us to here in his account. In the opening page of his gospel. The shepherd king. The shepherd king has arrived.

[13:56] That's what he's telling us. And this fact of the arrival of the shepherd king has massive implications. The arrival of God's king is not a neutral event.

How could it be? Even in human terms, the arrival of a new king or president or prime minister is never a neutral event.

Things happen with the arrival of a new king. Fortunes rise and fall. The markets move. How much more so when the king of kings enters the human story.

And these opening verses of Matthew. They make plain that the arrival of the king on the world scene does things. It provokes response.

Jesus is the shepherd king who leads, who fights enemies and protects his people. This is a hugely disruptive event. As one preacher put it, the gospel is the coming of God into the human situation.

[15:09] And since that human situation is characterized not only by need, but also by rebellion and revolt. It means that not only gladness, joy and blessing, but also conflict and battle are involved in the divine visitation.

And that's what we're seeing happening in this little passage. The arrival of this shepherd king, this child, does things. People respond.

People respond. Jesus Christ, as an infant, was even then doing what he was destined to be, a divider and a troubler of men.

And that's what we see in this passage. So let's notice these two responses to God's sovereign shepherd in this passage. So the first response is this.

Jesus' birth provokes opposition from his own people. His birth provokes opposition from his own people. We see in this passage the determined resistance from those who are most privileged.

[16:20] Now the birth of Jesus threatens Herod. He was the king of Judea and had by this point been on the throne for a good few years.

And he was known to be a particularly unpleasant and cruel king. He seems to have killed off most of his own family in order to protect his own reign.

So you can, in a sense, understand his hostility. When there in verse 2, some wise men arrive. And they say they're looking for the new king.

Now when you walk into somebody's palace and ask them where the king is, it will naturally unsettle that whoever's on the throne. Can you imagine? Walk into the Oval Office and ask President Trump where the president is.

I imagine you'll get a pretty short, swift response. And in fact, Matthew tells us in verse 3 that Herod was, look at verse 3, he was troubled when he heard this.

[17:21] And all Jerusalem with him. That's perhaps a bit of an understatement when you see what he does later on in the story. He was troubled. Where's the king? Well, he quickly summons his religious experts to find out more.

And he discovers that the child is likely in Bethlehem. And so he dispatches these wise men under the guise of wanting to come and worship him for himself.

Verse 8. Now his intentions were not as they appeared. We discover down in verse 16 that he orders all the male children in Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed.

This is the grim reality of a totalitarian ruler. He didn't want to go and worship Jesus. He wanted to kill him. Now Herod perceives Jesus to be a threat to his throne.

And of course, Jesus is a threat. But perhaps not in the way that Herod perceives it. This is far bigger than just a throne in Judea. Jesus is the king of the cosmos.

[18:35] He demands that all people everywhere, in all places, at all times, bow the knee and worship him. He's the king of the universe. And Herod's opposition here.

It is a reflection of the greater opposition to Jesus' kingship from Satan's kingdom of darkness. See, the gospel has and always will provoke opposition.

Wherever the truth is proclaimed, it will inevitably lead to division. Every human being that's ever lived naturally wants to have self on the throne.

And so when Jesus comes along with his claims to sovereignty, then one has to win out. Only one person can sit on an absolute throne.

And so when the gospel is declared, when Jesus' kingship is announced, some will fight it. Most will fight it. We see that all the time, don't we? People will fight Jesus' kingship.

[19:49] Perhaps you've, maybe you've brought somebody along to church. You can see in their face, and you can perhaps hear it in their words, that something of the gospel has gripped them.

They've been drawn in, but they sort of hold off a bit. They avoid coming to church again. They're aware of the implications, aren't they?

Perhaps that's you this morning. You've become more and more convinced of the truth of the gospel. But you're also seeing more clearly the implications of having Christ as king.

You can feel yourself resisting it. Certainly how it was for me. As I was drawn to the gospel, I was more aware of what this is going to mean.

I had to give things up, have him on the throne. And we do need to grapple with the reality that if the child Jesus we read about here, if he really was the son of God, the promised savior, the long-awaited shepherd king, then we really do lose the right to be in charge of our own lives.

[21:04] And people will fight that, didn't you? If you're here this morning as a follower of Jesus, didn't you once resist and fight against that rule? So that's the reality of what Jesus' coming means.

He's king, and we must submit to his rule. He's the rightful king. But it's also the case, as we see here, that the fiercest, most determined resistance come from those who are most privileged.

Not in terms of wealth or class, but rather in terms of their religious heritage. All they had known.

We read there in Matthew's account that all Jerusalem was troubled, verse 3, when they heard this

news from the wise men.

King has been born. The promised shepherd king is born. All Jerusalem was troubled. They shouldn't have been. They shouldn't have been troubled. This was the king they were waiting for. A king long promised. Just read through the Old Testament. They were waiting for this promised savior. This was a king they had knowledge of. But as we know, as we read through the whole Old Testament, it was those who should have responded first.

[22 : 26] Those who are most privileged. Jesus' own people that first rejected him. That's often the pattern, isn't it? Those who have been most privileged can be most hardened.

Now, as a nation, we have enjoyed greater gospel privileges than perhaps any nation in history. For centuries, we've had the Bible in our own language.

National churches. Great freedoms to proclaim the gospel. But look around. Generally speaking, church membership is in decline.

Secularism on the rise. That's very particular to the West, by the way. In almost every other area of the world, religion is on the rise. Christianity is growing. And set to grow for the foreseeable future. But here in the West, we have been most privileged are now most resistant. It's a sobering reality, isn't it?

[23 : 28] It's a sobering warning to our nation. We've enjoyed the fruits of Christianity for so long. But now we're seeking to enjoy those fruits without the essence of Christianity itself.

Tom Holland, the historian, not the actor, he said this. To live in a Western society is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions.

The air we breathe is of a Christian heritage. But that's not sustainable, he says. We can't continue to enjoy the benefits of the kingdom of God without God on the throne.

It was Nietzsche who wrote that when one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the rug out from under one's feet. And you see, many of the values that we take for granted living in the West, they grow out of the Christian faith.

And we will start to lose those values as we remove the grounds for them. As we want to evacuate Christianity, we're going to start to lose the values that we hold so dear. And our society, our culture needs to hear that warning.

[24 : 51] You can't just remove Christianity and hope to enjoy the fruits of it forever. However, don't reject Christ, the king, on the one hand, and expect to enjoy the benefits of his morality on the other.

So there is a strong warning here for our society, which has for so long enjoyed the privileges of Christian heritage. Those who are most privileged are often the most hardened.

That's a reality. And so if you're here this morning, in one of our venues or watching online, you've had a privilege of Christian upbringing, heritage.

Don't push Christ away. Don't reject him. Hear the warning. Have him as your king. But there's also an encouragement here for those who do follow Jesus as king.

As we feel the weight of the opposition to Jesus and his people, don't be discouraged by the fact of opposition. In the end, Herod's opposition falls flat on its face.

[26 : 01] Grace triumphs over evil. It always will in the end. Grace always triumphs over evil. And as Christians, we are not sort of working towards victory, but rather we're working from it.

The victory's been won. There's no doubt. Christ has won. And he is returning one day to claim his crown and his people. So do be encouraged.

Opposition to Christ would in the end fall flat on its face. Christ coming, it provokes opposition. But this is not the only response we see in our passage.

As one preacher said, the fact of Jesus coming, it acts like a sort of great invisible magnet, repelling some, but for others, drawing them irresistibly to himself.

And that's what we see in this passage. The second response we see is not opposition, but rather glad acceptance. Jesus' birth produces worship from the Gentile Magi.

[27 : 13] And we see an utterly joyful reception from those we wouldn't really expect. It's wonderful, isn't it? Now, these wise men who appear here in chapter 2, they come from absolutely nowhere, really.

We're not told where they came from, just they come from the east. Perhaps Persia, perhaps further east along the Silk Road, northern India or China, perhaps. But Matthew couldn't be clearer. These are outsiders. These are Gentiles. They haven't been heirs to the privileges of God's revelation through the prophets. And yet, here they are, traveling some considerable distance,

come to pay homage to Jesus, the King of the Jews.

It's the Gentiles, rather than the Jews, who are depicted here as coming to Christ. Just look at their reaction to discovering where Jesus was to be found.

Look at verse 10. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. That is perhaps to understate it. They were deliriously happy.

[28 : 25] They couldn't believe it. Their long journey was now at an end. And as soon as they see him, this child, in his mother's arms, they fall down and they worship him.

They offer him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, gifts fit for a king. Because as they knew, even better than his own people, that Jesus was a king.

He was the long-promised king of David's line. And what a joyful reception they give him, these Gentile wise men.

And it points us, doesn't it, to the universal gospel. Jesus is the king of the universe. And he calls all people, even these Gentile wise men, to come to bow down and worship him.

And he calls you today, no matter who you are, no matter your backgrounds. No one is too far gone.

[29 : 31] No one too insignificant. We don't even know the name of the country these men came from. We don't even have their names. And yet, they heard something.

They knew something. They came and they bowed to Jesus. And so often, that is just how God works. Calling those that you at least expect.

Just flick back to the start of Matthew chapter 1. And as you scan down the genealogy, this is Jesus' family tree. There's some pretty interesting names in there.

And three in particular, three women, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. These women were, by definition, outsiders.

Just read their stories in Genesis, Joshua and Ruth. Absolute outsiders, and yet, drawn into God's story. And here they are, in Jesus' family tree.

[30 : 31] You see, God calls to himself and uses for his purposes all sorts of people. And isn't it the case that so often, we see the joyful reception of Jesus from those that we least expect?

It's surprising, isn't it, how God works in people's lives. Just look around the room. We're a surprising bunch of people. Some pretty interesting stories amongst us. But that is how God works. He calls folk that we would consider outsiders. Beyond the pale. He draws them in. Perhaps you've written off friends or family.

Perhaps even yourself, you think, I'm too far gone. Well, don't. You see, he calls even you. Even those who are most outside the camp as such, we might think.

But God calls even people like that. People like you and me. So then, we see here two responses to God's long-promised sovereign shepherd.

[31 : 49] Opposition is, in the end, ultimately fruitless. Herod's plans are thwarted. You see there at the very end of our passage, the wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

They flee by another way. Herod's plans are thwarted. As will all the plans of those who seek to resist Jesus as king.

Those plans will, in the end, fail. How foolish Herod was. He was a pretend king who tried to resist the king of the universe. That is a task in futility, isn't it?

And so, too, today, those who reject Christ as king. It is ultimately futile because he is now on the throne. He will return one day to claim his kingdom.

And on that day, every knee will bow. He will come in judgment. To reject him is not only futile but foolish.

[32 : 54] So that's one response. You could reject him. But for those who genuinely seek him, those who come to him, they will find the wise men from the east.

They're able to return home, having searched for and found and worshipped the king that they sought. They joyfully received Jesus, the king, and they worshipped him.

Those are the two options that are before you this morning, before every human being that's ever walked this planet. Will you joyfully receive Jesus as king?

Or will you determinedly resist him? There is a choice that all of us must face, that you must face. So which king will you serve?

Will you stand in the line of Herod or the Magi and worship the true king? What will you do? Let's pray, shall we, as we close.

[34 : 11] Our Father God, we thank you for your word, which sweeps aside all sentimentality around the Christmas story and presents us with the reality.

And so, Lord, would you help us to respond, each one of us, no matter our background, no matter our privilege, no matter the difficulties we've come from.

Help each of us to respond rightly to you, our great king, the only king. So help us, Lord.

Help us to believe. Help us to trust and to follow your shepherd king, for we ask it in his name.

Amen.

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

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