

Mt. 2:1-12

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This Christmas we are focusing our thoughts on the Magi who came to worship the baby Jesus.

It's interesting isn't it,

That as we read Matthew's account of the baby Jesus,

There is no trip to Bethlehem to take part in a census.

There is no inn with a 'no vacancy' sign out the front.

There are no shepherds to greet the baby or angels announcing his birth.

But what we have are the Magi.

For Matthew the Magi are front and centre in the Christmas story.

And this year, they are for us too.

We often talk about them and sing about them

as three kings or three wise men-

But the Bible doesn't tell us that there were three of them,

It doesn't tell us that they were kings.

And whether they were wise or not depends on how you look at it.

So let me ask you to forget the carols for just a moment

And focus just on what God tells us in the Bible.

What we have before us is a story not about 3 kings but about 2 kings.

There are two kings in the story of the Magi.

But neither of them are Magi.

They are king Herod and king Jesus.

An earthly king and a heavenly king.

And really the contrast between the two could not have been stronger.

Herod was a king who lived in a palace.

Even his enemies admired

the magnificence of the architecture he had commissioned.

Jesus was a king who was born in an animal's feeding trough

And lived with peasant parents.

Herod was a king who had grasped power by force.

Jesus was born a king.
But Herod is very different to that.
He was an illegitimate king.
Let me explain –
Herod had not been born
in succession to the throne of a stable kingdom.
He had grasped power in a tumultuous time,
And held onto it by disposing of anyone else
who looked like they might want to take it from him.
And he held power by cosyng up to the Romans
on whose behalf he ruled.
He was a tyrant to those he ruled over
And a boot licker to those who could keep him in power.
Jesus on the other hand was born a king.
The Magi ask Herod this question,
2:2 “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?”
No one is born a king.
Some people are born princes.
And they become king of the death of their father.
But the Magi don’t ask,
“Where is the one born to be king of the Jews?”
They ask,
“Where is the one born king of the Jews?”
Jesus was king from birth.
Indeed God the Son was king from before the creation of the world.
The Magi would not have known it,
But their question would have rattled Herod’s cage.
Herod was often accused of being an illegitimate king
Because he had seized power not had it given by birthright.
He dealt brutally with those who made such accusations.
And here were these foreigners asking about a child born king.
In verse 3 Matthew tells us,
‘When Herod heard this question,
He was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.’
Herod was disturbed because he saw a potential threat on the horizon.

The people of Jerusalem were disturbed
because they knew the dangers of Herod.
When Herod was disturbed, people lost their lives.

When we compare Herod and Jesus,
We get a sharp contrast
between God's way of being king and a human way.
The human way of being king is to grasp at power
And then do whatever it takes to hold onto it.
God's way of being king in fact has more power than the human way.
God can draw people from a distant land to worship his king,
And when they come, they come voluntarily.
No one forced the Magi to follow the star,
Indeed no one asked the Magi to follow the star.
Did you notice that?
God didn't send the Magi an angel or a dream
telling them to follow the star.
They just decided that was what they were going to do.
It's somewhat disconcerting for us
that God would include people
who presumably used some occult practices
to divine what the stars were telling them.
But God can save people from anywhere to follow his son.
They might have been up to some stuff that is frankly unhelpful.
God can still save them.
The question is "Will they respond to God's invitation?"
Not "Are they good enough to receive God's invitation?"
And they did respond.
They travelled a long way to worship the baby King.
And they chose to give God's king costly presents.
They did it because they wanted to.
They were not seeking a reward in return.
The baby had no way to grant them a royal boon.
Baby Jesus (or toddler Jesus he may have been by this stage)
would not even have understood what was going on.

Joseph and Mary had no way to repay the Magi for their kindness.
They were simple folk.

The Magi came and worshipped God's king voluntarily,
Seeking nothing in return.

No one ever worshipped Herod

because the desire just welled up in their heart.

If they paid Herod homage it was because they feared him.

No one ever gave Herod presents seeking nothing in return.

Herod extracted extortionate rates of taxation.

But it's kingship of a different order

that attracts willing service.

This picture of God's humble yet persuasive kingship-

His powerful yet meek rule

Is still the way we see God operating today.

No one is forced to bow the knee to Jesus this Christmas.

There have been shameful periods in the church's history
such as the crusades in the 11-13C,

where people were forced to bow the knee to Jesus

at the point of a sword.

But that's not the way God works

And it's not the way his servants should work either.

If people are going to respond to Jesus,

They have to do it

because God is at work quietly in their hearts by his Spirit,

so that the impetus for their response at a human level

seems to come from within.

No one can be coerced into responding to Jesus.

Does it strike you as odd,

That across Hastings in all the churches,

Maybe, at an outside maximum,

five hundred people will come

to worship the Lord Jesus this Christmas?

In truth the number is probably less even than that.

It's the time when we celebrate
the God of all the universe becoming a man.
Becoming one of us to save us, his people, from our sins.
And probably 95% of the population
can't be bothered acknowledging it.
Now for a proportion of them,
They don't believe that it's true.
But if you believe surveys,
Around half of Australians do believe that Jesus is the Son of God.
half of us believe it,
But only a tiny fraction can be bothered doing something about it.
God doesn't coerce people into responding to his Son.
He's not going to make you.
If people are going to worship Jesus as their king,
They have to do it like the Magi did,
Freely and of their own volition.

But notice in Matthew's account there's no false modesty.
It's not like when the Magi gave the gold, frankincense and myrrh
That Mary and Joseph said,
"Awe shucks,
You really shouldn't have.
We're just ordinary folk with an ordinary baby."
They knew that wasn't true.
They'd each had a visit from an angel to let them know.
When the Magi offered gifts,
They accepted them as an act of worship to their son,
One that was his due.
As Matthew is writing his account,
He doesn't hold back from telling us
the reasons we too should be worshiping Jesus.
He begins this chapter with the phrase,
"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea ..."
And when Herod asks the chief priests
where the Christ is to be born,

They said,
“In Bethlehem in Judea ...”
Matthew makes sure the wording is the same
So that you can't miss the conclusion.
Jesus is the Christ,
God's chosen leader for his people.
There's no false modesty.
Who Jesus is and why he came are clearly proclaimed.
As we read the story,
We can't help but draw the inference
That the star that lead the Magi
Didn't appear by chance.
God put it there.
And the reason that God put it there
Was because God wanted to lead the Magi to worship his Son.
God is arranging things supernaturally
so that people will worship his Son.
There's no false modesty.
This baby is king of the world.
This baby is worthy of the most costly of gifts.
This baby ought to be worshiped by every person on the planet.
But, here's the catch,
No one is going to make you do it.
You have to choose to worship Jesus.
Sometimes you have to choose to go out of your way to worship Jesus.
Presumably the Magi had gone a long way out of their way.
There's evidence in the passage that we read last week
that the Magi might have travelled up to 2 years
to visit Jesus and worship him.
Because Herod wanted to kill all the babies
in and around Bethlehem 2 years old and under.
The most likely reason for that is that the Magi had told Herod
that the star had appeared up to two years earlier.
If that's the case,
it's a significant journey to go and worship the new King.

But at a bare minimum, it's 4-5 months to walk
from Persia to Israel around the fertile crescent.
That's a long way to go to give someone a present.
No one in Hastings need go so far to worship Jesus this Christmas.
You don't have to travel for months
but you do need to make it happen yourself.
No one will do it for you.
No one will force you.

That's what kind of king the Lord Jesus is.
He is unimaginably great.
The one through whom the universe was created.
The one who will return to judge the living and the dead.
But though he is powerful he's also meek.
The news of his greatness is proclaimed clearly,
But after that it's up to people to respond.
Some like the Magi will be drawn to bow down and worship
And will give him the honour he is due.
But others can only recognise a king like Herod.
Unless they are forced to bow the knee,
They will never pay homage.
Unfortunately they will miss out on finding God's Saviour.
This Christmas we recognise king Jesus for who he is.

I said at the beginning of the sermon,
That in this passage we find two different kinds of kings,
Only one of them is worthy to be worshiped.
One will try to compel people to accept his rule by force.
The other will force no one.
But yet those who worship him will offer him their lives in his service.
Of course no one will make you.
It's up to you if you choose to worship Jesus.
If you come,
You'll have to do it like the Magi did –
Freely and of your own volition.

But Jesus is a king who rules for the benefit of his subjects.
He came to save us.
His yoke is easy and his burden is light.
He is the true light that gives light to everyone.
He is one who gives the right to become children of God.
He is full of grace and truth.
Wise people choose a king like that.