

Matthew 2:1-12

### **Herod: the appointed King**

By this time, Herod was an old man. Perhaps not yet 70, and not old by today's standards.

His father, Antipater, a convert to Judaism, supported both Pompey's conquest of Judea in 63 BC, and later Julius Caesar, gaining Roman citizenship and influence. Herod inherited these titles and used them to his advantage.

As a young man Herod was appointed governor of Galilee in 47 BC; he impressed Roman leaders with his efficiency and ruthlessness.

When the Parthians invaded Judah (40 BC) Herod fled to Rome looking for support. The Roman Senate, with Mark Antony's backing, declared Herod "King of the Jews" and gave him an army to reclaim Judea. By 37 BC Herod had defeated rivals and secured his throne.

He remained loyal to Rome and carefully aligned himself with the Roman leaders, shifting allegiances as needed, ensuring Rome's continuing support.

Herod legitimized his rule by massive construction – fortresses, aqueducts, theatres, and, most famously, the rebuilding of the Second temple in Jerusalem.

He married Mariamne of the Hasmonean dynasty to link himself to Jewish royal lineage, though he later executed her and other family members when he suspected disloyalty. Herod was notorious for killing potential challengers, including two of his own sons.

To further reinforce support, he created a new elite loyal to him, weakening traditional priestly and royal families.

Herod, by appointment of Rome, was King of the Jews.

### **The Magi arrive in Jerusalem**

Picture the caravan of camels with their exotic riders, the magi, plus their soldiers and attendants, as they process into Jerusalem towards the royal palace, the place where they anticipated finding a new-born royal baby.

They weren't expected, but news reaches Herod very quickly. Imagine what Herod is thinking. He's likely flattered that he should be sought out by such a distinguished looking group who have travelled such a long way. And he gives them an audience.

Picture then his fury when he hears what they were asking: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

No wonder he’s frightened. He thought that he’d dealt with all those who could usurp his power. But it appears that Herod is deeply aware of the messianic expectation surrounding the child the magi seek. If this child is born to be king of the Jews, then he would be a legitimate rival to the throne and a threat to Herod.

### **The Title “King of the Jews”**

Let’s consider the title “King of the Jews” for a moment.

It’s only in Matthew’s Gospel that we have the story of the magi. The title “King of the Jews” used by the Magi isn’t used again until Jesus is brought before Pilate at his trial and crucifixion, which we can read about in each of the four gospels.

In Matthew, the title frames Jesus’ life. It was outsiders, the magi, who recognize him as king at birth, and Romans proclaim him king at death. Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” The soldiers mock Jesus by clothing him in robes of royal colours and a crown of thorns on his head. The inscription above the cross reads “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

Strikingly, the title is only ever spoken by Gentiles.

Despite the irony of the soldier’s accusations, we Christians take his kingship as profound truth. The repetition across the four Gospels underscores that Jesus’ kingship is central to his identity. It’s not a kingship of worldly power, but of humility, service and sacrifice. All who seek Jesus, us included, are invited to consider what true authority looks like.

Now let’s pause and ask:

What does this mean for us?

We all invest considerable effort being the way we are, what we have and how we do things. Does the thought or idea of Jesus’ kingship in your life feel like a threat?

Are you ready to let Jesus take the throne of your life?

### **Herod’s fear and the Magi’s hope**

Back to Herod!

He feels threatened. He must find out where this child is. Herod feigns interest in wanting to pay homage to the child himself, but secretly he is plotting to kill the child, his paranoia consistent with his character, eliminating any perceived threat to his rule.

Let’s not be like Herod!

Herod points the Magi in the right direction. I expect they are confused. Not only is there no royal baby, but the current king also doesn't know about him either. They had travelled so far; they couldn't give up now; what would a few more days of travel matter?

Ahead of them went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. At last, they could now pay homage to the child born to be king of the Jews.

After a long, uncertain journey, their hearts were filled with relief. Their joy wasn't just happiness, it was the deep satisfaction of finding what they had been seeking, and it was an overwhelming joy that could not be contained.

### **Inside the house at Bethlehem**

Inside that ordinary house, in what had been the quiet of a Bethlehem evening, the baby is finally asleep. Mary & Joseph are whispering so as not to disturb him.

Suddenly, outside, there's a commotion, voices raised not in anger but in joy. Joseph, slightly annoyed, goes to the door, half-expecting the shepherds again. He's ready to hush them to protect the child's and Mary's rest.

But when he opens the door, he sees something entirely different: foreign men, richly dressed, their faces alight with wonder, singing, clapping and dancing, and speaking in a tongue he doesn't understand.

The magi, through their translator, ask hesitantly, "Is this the place where a baby has been born?" Joseph's surprise mirrors theirs. He closes the door, bewildered.

"Did you tell the shepherds to be quiet?" Mary asks.

"No," Joseph replies, "It's not the shepherds."

"Then who?"

"I don't know," Joseph admits, "but they speak a strange language, and they're asking about Jesus."

When the Magi are finally welcomed in, their homage is more than bowing and words of praise and adoration. They listen intently as Mary recounts with joy the angel's message and her pregnancy, their own journey to Bethlehem, the shepherds visit, and the child's name given by God.

The Magi marvel not only at the sight of the child but at the story surrounding him. They share their story too – how months previously they had seen this strange star, how they had interpreted its meaning, how they had planned and got together everything needed for their journey of unknown direction and duration. And how they had brought with them their treasure chests with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the child.

I also invite you to imagine yourselves in the small room.

What would you feel?

What would you offer?

I also imagine Mary and Joseph perhaps feeling a little awkward. They were unprepared for visitors and had no food to offer them. But the Magi call their attendants, and from their travel stores a sumptuous meal is prepared and shared by all.

### **What we learn from the Magi**

So, I wonder, what can we learn from the Magi about worshipping God, and the Christ child especially?

As we come to our times of worship, are we filled with overwhelming joy? Is our posture and praise whole-hearted? Are we generous with our gifts? These are meant to be challenging questions. And my own response is no, probably not, and I'm not sure.

Their journey was long, their gifts were expensive. How much effort and sacrifice are we prepared to make? What gifts – of time, resources, or talents – might we lay before Christ now?

### **The Magi go home another way**

Back in Bethlehem, the Magi could see that Mary and Joseph were tired. The baby, asleep for most of the evening, was awake and wanted another feed. Leaving the young family, the Magi retired to their newly erected tents on the field opposite. They were still excited and talked for hours about what they had heard, until they fell asleep and the last one realised he was talking to himself.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their country by another road.

Matthew didn't add this as just an interesting bit of geography. No, the Magi had had an encounter with Jesus Christ. It was transformative, life changing.

### **Our response**

What about us?

Will we receive the story of Jesus with joy, as the Magi did?

Let's not be like Herod, who feared and resisted.

But let's be like the Magi, who rejoiced and worshipped, and who were transformed.

Amen.

James Parsons