

“THE FIFTH KING”

Matthew 2:1-18

As we’ve already noted, we’re just coming up to the Feast of Epiphany, the time when we remember the visitors who came to see Jesus with their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. In the version we read, they are referred to as “*Magi*”, but other translations have “*wise men*” – and other traditions call them “*kings*”. We’ve sung about the Three Kings this morning and in many countries there are traditions which are based on there being Three Kings. Of course, as many of you would be quick to point out if I didn’t say it from the front, The Bible doesn’t actually say that there were three of them: that’s a tradition that has grown up because there were three gifts, but in that tradition, they also have names – Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar. They were almost certainly stargazers – astrologers rather than astronomers – and very likely were Zoroastrians from Persia – the title Magus is specific to a high caste in that religion.

But let’s stick with the “Kings” description this morning – and let’s also stick to the tradition that there were three of them. So this story becomes the story of The Kings, because all the main characters in it are, indeed, kings. It’s actually the story of The Five Kings. Apart from Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar there is, of course, King Herod. He’s the baddie here, the one who would be booed if it were a pantomime. But that’s not legend or fairy story – Herod was a brutal tyrant and definitely not a nice person to spend Christmas with.

If you know anything about the New Testament, you’ll know that there are several Herods who are mentioned and none of them is particularly nice. But this is effectively the first Herod, Herod the Great, the Daddy of them all. He was an Idumean, not a Jew at all, and was appointed to this role as “King of the Jews” by the Romans in 40BC. It took him three years actually to gain control and he was a pretty ruthless monarch, as were most rulers in those days. He always thought there was someone out to get him, and became so paranoid about it that he murdered his wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, an uncle and various other unrelated people. Now I realise that such thoughts may have crossed the minds of some of you over the Christmas period, as your brother-in-law discovered and drank your supposedly secret store of good whisky and your mother-in-law just sat and moaned about every aspect of your living arrangements, but, provoked as you may have been, none of you actually did anything about it. Herod the Great spent most of his reign – which lasted from 37BC to 4BC – disposing of people he didn’t like or whom he considered to pose a threat to his position. That’s why he responded as he did to the news that there might be a rival to him in the shape of this little baby whom the Persian Kings were seeking. (He did build commission some nice buildings, though – and built a fine new Temple.)

That’s four Kings. The fifth King is the one who caused all the trouble in this story – Jesus. The Kings from the east told Herod, the King of Judea, that they were looking for “*the one who has been born King*

of the Jews". There couldn't really be anything worse to say to a King who was so insecure in his own position and so paranoid about losing it, than that you were looking for his rival. To give him his due, Herod didn't initially fly off the handle, but he did hatch a cunning plan to get rid of the young threat to his power base, a plan which involved wholesale slaughter of anyone around Jesus' age.

Jesus, we know, was taken off to safety in Egypt, and he was able to survive and grow into adulthood, where this title of King of the Jews got him into more hot water. The people who heard his teaching tried on one occasion to make him king by force (*John 6:15*, after Jesus had fed 5,000 of them). And it was a key part of his trial before Pilate and before Herod the Great's successor, Herod Antipas. In fact, when Jesus was crucified, Pilate had a sign put over the cross proclaiming that he was "*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*", despite some voices raised in opposition to that. (You can read all about that in *Matthew 27*, if you want.)

So, all these five Kings are important in the story, but the most important of them all is the one who, to start with, seems the most insignificant – Jesus. And that's because he's not just a King, not just King of the Jews, but he is King of kings. Throughout his time on earth, Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, the coming Kingdom – in other words, he was talking about a new kind of rule, a new way of living, a kingdom which went beyond all borders, all jurisdictions, all empires, and which wasn't kept in place by paranoia or brutality or fear. It's a Kingdom in which love is supreme and in which the values and attitudes are those of God's righteousness and justice, a Kingdom which restores the world and everything in it to the way God originally planned and created it, a Kingdom in which evil has no place and which will endure for all eternity.

When Jesus grew up he told men and women what this Kingdom was all about – and, more importantly, he demonstrated in his own life just what that Kingdom would look like. Those who misunderstood him and saw this sovereign rule of God as a threat to their own hegemony took it into their heads to do away with him, but as Jesus died on the cross and then was raised back to life again, so the Kingdom actually became a reality, men and women were now able really to become citizens of that Kingdom. And, from the point of view of Jesus' kingship, as Paul writes in *Philippians 2:9-11*, "*God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

In *Revelation*, the glorious vision that John had of the final consummation of this Kingdom, Jesus, as Lamb of God, is given the title "*King of kings*" on more than one occasion. He is the King above all other kings, the one to whom all men and women – all creation, even – rightly bow down in awed wonder

and worship. And for those who take seriously his claims and who receive the grace which he offers, that acceptance of him as King of kings begins right here and now. As another year begins – although in many ways it's a completely arbitrary point at which to do it – we can recommit ourselves to acknowledging his Kingship in our lives; we can once again re-affirm that we recognise his rule. Here on the threshold of 2012, we pause to think about our response to Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords.

As with any ruler we offer him our **RESPECT**. We realise that he is worthy of our acknowledgement as King. We listen to what he has to say and ponder his words and his ways. We accept that we are under his rule and try to build that into our way of looking at the world.

But, as with a King who has demonstrated the authenticity of his rule and shown integrity in his words and actions, we also offer him our **REVERENCE**. That's a bit more than respect. It recognises his superiority over us and his greater knowledge and wisdom. As followers of King Jesus, we express our reverence for him in our worship. He is the focus of our thanksgiving and our petition. We allow our love for him to overflow in our songs and our prayers – and, more importantly, in the way we live our lives. We realise that his wisdom and his righteousness are way beyond anything we could ever hope to replicate. We acknowledge his role in creating and sustaining our universe. We see the signature of his rule in the glory of a sunset, the power of a waterfall, the colours of the rainbow; we hear it in the soaring beauty of a symphony, the song of the birds, the rhythm of a sonnet; we taste it in the flavour of an apple, the tang of a curry, the bite of a cheese. We realise, too, that this King has overcome the forces of evil and holds before us the promise of an eternity spent with him free from tears and pain and frustration. So we worship. Our natural human response is to bow down and kneel in awed wonder at the amazing activity of this King above all kings.

Then, having acknowledged and bowed down before such a King, our lives will then be lived in **OBEDIENCE** to him. If we recognise that he is the one who has all wisdom and who has already overcome everything that could possibly cause us harm, then we can willingly submit to his benevolent rule. We have read the manifesto of his Kingdom in the pages of the Bible. We have experienced the reality of his care and concern for us in our daily lives. We have put our faith in his victory over sin and death. So now we accept that he knows best and we follow the way he sets out for us.

As we enter another year, are you ready to respect, worship and obey the King of kings? Will you stand with the rest of us in a few minutes as we say together our New Year Prayer – and really mean it? Let's pray that, as a church and as individuals, we will have the help of God's Holy Spirit to follow the King of kings wherever he leads during 2012.