

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 4”**

***Matthew 2:1-12***

Well, here's another bit of the Christmas story in July! You may remember that, as part of our journey through Matthew's Gospel, we looked last week at Joseph's decision to stick by Mary despite her unusual pregnancy, and at the names which their son was to be given – Jesus, the Saviour, and Emmanuel, God with us. We also said that reflecting on these stories now, well away from the Christmas season, might allow us to see them without all the tradition and mythology of our usual Christmas celebrations clouding our view of what Matthew is trying to say.

Matthew doesn't actually include all that much of the traditional Christmas stuff in his account anyway – no shepherds, no angelic choirs, no stable – but he does include this report of the wise men from the east who have come to visit the young child and his earthly family. We tend to refer to them as “The Three Kings”, but as you will have heard countless times, it doesn't actually say that there were three of them – we've just assumed that because of the three gifts they brought – and they weren't kings either. The version which we've just read translates their titles as “*Magi*”, the plural of “*Magus*”. You'll find a story about Simon Magus in the book of *Acts*, although he isn't really much like these men.

Basically, these were the scholars and philosophers of Ancient West Asia, probably from Persia. They would have been Arabic in their ethnicity and would have been men who studied science and medicine, who read widely and who studied the way the world worked, particularly with reference to the influence of the stars. There were elements of astrology in their world view and they were considered by the rest of the population to be very wise and learned. In some places they also fulfilled an almost priestly role because of the air of mystery that surrounded them. They were also, undoubtedly, Gentiles – non-Jews – and that fits in with what we said about Matthew's Gospel a few weeks back: that Matthew was wanting to show that despite Jesus' undeniably Jewish pedigree, his message was for all people.

At this time, men like the Magi would have been studying the heavens, the movements of the stars and planets, and accorded to any strange phenomena a powerful significance. For them, something unusual in the heavens meant that something unusual was going to happen on earth. And at this time there was a very real sense of expectation in the world at large that something very special was about to happen. A number of Roman writers, including Suetonius, Tacitus and Seneca, report a growing expectation in the world that dramatic events were just around the corner. So when these men noted some curious movements amongst the stars and planets, they felt they needed to go and have a look, and trekked westwards in order to keep these heavenly bodies in view. For them, this celestial activity was a sign of a new and powerful king arriving on earth.

And their search leads them to Jerusalem, capital city of Judea, seat of King Herod. Their conclusion is that they must be looking for a new King of the Judeans, a new King of the Jews. [Just an aside here. We spoke a couple of weeks ago about the way in which Matthew has put this book together – the symmetries and contrasts within in. The next time after this that Jesus is referred to as King of the Jews is by the Roman soldiers – more Gentiles – as they are about to execute him.] As powerful and influential visiting dignitaries, the Magi go to the court of King Herod and, in their naivety, ask him if he knows anything about this new King of the Jews.

Now, we'll say a bit more about Herod next week, but just a little bit about him now so that we can see what these Magi are dealing with. Herod the Great, as he was known (there are quite a few Herods mentioned in the New Testament) had become King of Judea in 37BC. And there was some justification for calling him “Great”, despite the ruthlessness for which he has become infamous. He did manage to unite a number of warring factions and created a fairly stable nation. He initiated an ambitious building programme in Jerusalem, which included the rebuilding of the Temple. He showed himself to be a wise and generous ruler when there were national emergencies, in particular a famine and an outbreak of cholera. But, as with so many great leaders, he had a fatal flaw which unfortunately overshadowed everything else: he was hugely and irrationally suspicious. He assumed everyone was out to get him and

felt he had a very shaky hold on power. And this paranoia led him to behave like many other leaders then and now by ruthlessly eliminating his supposed rivals. Amongst the many people he had assassinated were his wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law and assorted uncles – and that was just within his family. So desperate was he to hang on to the power he had that he would countenance no dissent and absolutely no rivals.

So imagine his reaction as this group of foreign dignitaries pitch up at his court asking to see the newborn King of the Jews! Herod is deeply suspicious at the best of times, but now he is both suspicious and desperate. He is “*disturbed*”, Matthew tells us, and adds that all Jerusalem were disturbed with him – no doubt they feared what the consequences might be if this was all true. He is anxious to discover what his own wise men – “*the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law*” – might be able to tell him about this “*Christ*” or Messiah. Again, let’s note in passing that Matthew equates Messiah and King here – that will be important as we work our way through his book.

Once again, Matthew emphasises how this all fits in with the prophecies of the Old Testament. What is happening has been planned by God and foretold by his prophets and preachers. This is all exactly what the Jewish people – and these new Jewish Christians for whom he is writing this book – should have expected. He even focuses in on Bethlehem, the city of David – “*David’s royal city*”, as the carol puts it – the birthplace of a King and very much in the tradition of the Kings of Israel. The Jewish scholars remind Herod of the words of the prophet Micah (*Micah 5:2*), but although they now have some evidence of what’s going on, of what God’s plan is, they themselves refuse to act upon it. All they do is tell Herod: they do not, as far as we know, show any inclination to find out more, and certainly no inclination to pay homage to this new King themselves.

The Magi, however, as soon as they have spoken with Herod and been unwittingly drawn into his conspiracy to track down and eliminate his supposed rival, hurry off to Bethlehem where they find the holy family. Matthew refers to Jesus here as a child, rather than a baby, and the family are in a house, rather than the stable, so most people have assumed that this happened some time after the actual birth of Jesus. And as they approach the new King of the Jews, the promised Messiah, they bow down (or, as the carol puts it, “*entered in ... full reverently upon one knee*”, which must have been mighty uncomfortable) and offer him gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Now these three gifts have been imbued with a great deal of significance over the centuries, as I’m sure you know. They have been given a kind of prophetic meaning. **Gold**, understandably, marks out a king, so this points to Jesus’ kingship, Messiahship. **Frankincense** is usually associated with the priesthood. It was used in the worship in the Temple and symbolised the prayers of the faithful rising up to God. It’s importance is clear from the recipe for it in *Exodus 30*, and from the decree that the penalty for anyone trying to copy the recipe for any other use is death. (It makes those notices at the beginning of DVDs about copying them seem rather tame, doesn’t it?) So, many people have said, this points to the priestly role of Jesus, something that is spelt out very clearly in *Hebrews 9:11-15*, amongst other places. **Myrrh** is often said to be linked with death, as it was used in preparing bodies for burial, so there’s a hint here of Jesus’ sacrificial death. It has to be said, though, that everyone dies, so we are reading things back into here. It’s also clear from the mentions of myrrh in the Old Testament that it was also a symbol of joy and a high-class beauty treatment (think Lancôme) – and, in *Song of Solomon*, of various other things as well.

Now, it’s quite valid to link these three gifts to prophetic symbolism of what Jesus was to become – King, Priest and Sacrifice – but it also has to be said that, at this time, these were quite popular gifts that were given by visiting dignitaries to the foreign leaders they came to see. The main thing to note, then, is that these Magi clearly viewed Jesus as a King, as someone who deserved their homage and their very best gifts. No trays of Ferrero Rocher for this leader! Matthew, whatever else he may be suggesting through his mention of these gifts, is making it clear once again that Jesus had come into this world as the Kingly Messiah. Clearly Herod does not want to go and pay homage to this new King (would you?), but his reaction, which we’ll see in more detail next week, makes it clear that he too has his suspicions about this child being a King.

Now we're just into the second chapter of this Gospel. Not a great deal has happened yet, other than Jesus' being born and his receiving some visitors, but can you see how eager Matthew is to demonstrate that this Jesus is both fully Jewish and the long-awaited Kingly Messiah? Every little episode of the story so far has underlined that. The Jewish Christians to whom Matthew seems to be addressing this book must surely see that this is all very much in line with what they already believe as Matthew tries to reassure them that it's OK to believe in Jesus – in fact, their own Scriptures, our Old Testament, really only makes sense if they do believe in him.

And Matthew is also making it clear that the presence of Jesus as the Kingly Messiah, his very existence, demands a response. You cannot remain neutral when it comes to Jesus. And in this early part of the story, the reactions are extreme, but point to the effect which Jesus will have on every person in every generation. The Magi come to pay homage, to worship, to offer their gifts in humility and reverence. Herod finds he cannot ignore Jesus, but goes out of his way to try and destroy him. As we read on through the Gospel, we'll see that Jesus polarises opinion, that people love him and want to follow him, or they hate him and want to dispose of him. Whatever they do, they cannot ignore him.

That's still the case. Jesus lived – there's no doubt about that. Jesus died – again, no doubt. Jesus returned to life – that takes some faith, but Christians believe it's true. Jesus is still at work – plenty of evidence for that in the lives of his followers. What's your response? Jesus demands a decision. You cannot ignore him once you've heard about him. You can tread the path of the Magi to bow at his feet and offer yourself and your gifts in humility and worship. Or you can follow the example of Herod and try to dispose of him, to rid your life of him. If you do accept that he's King, that he's the Messiah God promised, then you need to live your life in every aspect with that in mind. If you don't accept that – or, more likely, you do accept that Jesus is King but refuse to allow that to affect your daily life – then you'll have to face the consequences of that decision. But no-one can make that decision for you, so give it some serious thought as we read on through this Gospel.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. The Magi were clearly astrologers. How does that fit with our views on astrology?
2. Why are so many people so desperate for power? Is that always sinful? Why/why not?
3. In what ways is Jesus a priest? (You may find the book of *Hebrews* helpful here.)
4. Jesus has always elicited extreme reactions. Why do you think that is?
5. Is it really impossible to ignore Jesus once you have heard about him? Why/why not? How can we help people to respond to him in the right way?