

Advent Study series 2020

Session 3

The Wise Men encounter Herod – God controls

Matthew 2:1-12



Although this passage is about an event that takes place after Jesus birth, so strictly speaking not an Advent encounter, this story presents to us something worth remembering as we review our relationship with God – and particularly in view of the state of the world this Advent – the fact that God is in control.

This session we meet three of the many mysterious characters described in the pages of scripture – variously referred to as : wise men... magi...pagan astrologers... kings. And however Matthew intended us to think of them, here are the three people who journey from “the East” to see the baby born to Mary... and en route encounter King Herod

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Sound familiar? Here we have a well-known, vivid and colourful passage. Imagine the robes they wore! Smell the frankincense and myrrh! ... Smell the camels!! With the angels and shepherds, these three form an integral part of our composite picture of the nativity...

... But did they exist outside of Matthew's narrative?

A word about historical accuracy...

This story throws up some challenging questions so let's think about three of them. First, **why is Matthew the only gospel writer to mention them?**

Secondly, **why would any non-Jew (even if they had access to Jewish scriptures) be interested enough in a baby born in Israel (even if they believed he would be a king) to make a long and arduous journey to see him?**

And (looking ahead to verses 13-19) **why are there no records in the other gospels or from Jewish historians from the period, mentioning this order of Herod's to kill infants?**

With the eyes of faith we can respond to each of these questions...

So what is your response?

In later Christian tradition, as believers sought to understand the nativity narrative in the light of Old Testament scriptures, (eg Psalm 72:10, Isaiah 60:10), these visitors became Kings, and later still acquired the names Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar, names pointing to peoples beyond the borders of Israel's land.

Now – deep breath – let's be brave and sit with the idea, held by many scholars, that this was a *small* story Matthew may have embellished from legend or even made up, to serve the *big* purpose of his gospel: to reveal Jesus as the light of – and to – the world. (Remember his gospel ends with Jesus instruction to his followers to go and make disciples of all nations)

How does Matthew's account of the visit of the Wise Men serve this big purpose? (It might help to look up **Isaiah 53...**)

Whatever we make of the visit of the Wise Men, we can certainly say that Matthew had a strong reason to include this in the opening of his gospel.

Jesus born in Bethlehem, to a virgin, fulfils God's plan – and Jewish prophecy – but he is rejected by those to whom he was sent and is instead sought out, recognised and worshipped by Gentiles. So let's think about the Wise Men and their encounter with King Herod...

Our preparations have been made and all is now in readiness for our journey. The camels are loaded, the gifts we will take safely are stowed in our bags. My servant Spiros tells me many think we are deluded, that we have mis-interpreted

the stars. But I hold firm. I, Balthasar, am advanced in years and in the course of my lifetime I have studied philosophy, astronomy and the writings of the world's cultures and can claim, I think, that there is no-one more able at reading the course of human events from the movements in the heavens.

I am not wrong! My astral observations, supported by those of my companions for the journey, and by my knowledge of sacred writings, have convinced me that something spectacular has happened. A child has been born – a child who will become a king... I have a strange urge to meet him.

It has been difficult for Melchior and Caspar. They each act as advisers who interpret their King's dreams and the Kings are anxious at the thought of their departure and long absence from their respective country...

They call me Herod the Great, and rightly so. I am Great! I was Governor of Galilee before following my father to become King of Judea. I rule a proud nation and I have friends in high places! Mark Antony and I were chariot racing only last week... One needs to be in with the Romans. Power and fortune lie in their gift... But after my father's conversion I am a good Jew too. I follow the dietary rules and you would not believe how much money I have spent renovating the Temple... I have many wives, many sons and probably many daughters, although they are of little account ... I am Great ... but I am not happy.

I have enemies within my gates and beyond the city walls. With my posse of guards I still fear for my life each time I leave my palace but who is to say an attack will come from a stranger? I have a food taster but still I cannot eat without fear that any morsel could be poisoned. Even my sons plot against me. All want to be king. Some are weak but others were a real threat and I had no choice but to arrange the murder of those I feared. I will kill anyone who threatens me...

As we had expected, it has been a long, slow journey, following the star that has shone so brightly each night. We are used to sleeping during the day to be awake to study the stars in the hours of darkness but even so, we are weary.

We have moved steadily west but we do not know precisely where to find the child we seek, So, as the star beckoned us towards Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judea, holy city of the Jews, we have decided to make enquiries at the court of their King, Herod the Great.

They came to my palace without warning. Three men dressed in fine garments – intelligent, learned, educated ... obviously well born and of high rank in their own countries. My chief adviser conveyed the purpose of their visit – to find a child who has been born to be King of the Jews. One would have expected them to seek such a child in my household – that would explain their arrival here – but it seems they wanted directions to a place away from Jerusalem. Some nonsense about following a star...

But I was afraid... I know my scriptures, I know the Jewish Messiah is expected... but surely not now! So while they accepted our hospitality I quickly summoned all my advisers and the religious leaders and asked them to remind me where the prophets said Messiah would come from. ...

The palace was a tense place, whispers, furtive glances, unsmiling people. We could almost smell a fear in the air and when we were summoned to stand before the

throne of Herod, we could understand why. We did not need to confer to know that none of us trusted the man or his motivation. Arrogance and fear were both evident in his demeanour and cruelty was audible in his voice. We made haste to agree to his request that we find the child in Bethlehem and send him word of the infant's exact whereabouts – so we could leave quickly.

They will return with the information I seek. Then I will have the child killed. I am Herod the Great. There can be no other King of Judah.

To our surprise, 'our' star stopped moving over a cave on the outskirts of the tiny town of Bethlehem, about six miles from Jerusalem. Much bewildered but strangely moved by joy, we climbed down from our camels to see a man, like me advanced in years, standing at the entrance, as if on guard. He moved aside to let us peer in. And what an unexpected sight! A young girl sitting beside a cattle feeding trough, that held a baby, wrapped in cloth, fast asleep. There was a stillness there and a peace that we had not felt before or since and reluctant to break the silence, we quietly returned to our camels, unpacked our gifts and, still silent, went into the cave, to give them to the young girl, clearly the infant's mother. But the baby was now awake so we presented them to him – Melchior's Frankincense, Caspar's Myrrh and finally my Gold...

God is clearly in control of events in this story.

How do we see this in the journey of the Wise Men?

How do we see this is their meeting with Herod?

"Surely not now!"

Although he seems to have forgotten Micah's naming of Bethlehem as the place from which Israel's ruler would come (Micah 5:2), Herod knew that the Jews should expect the arrival of their Messiah. But he was not prepared for this. Instead he tries to control events around him to ensure his safety and survival.

As Christians we believe this first coming of Messiah happened with the arrival of the Bethlehem baby and we know from the same scriptures Herod would have known and from our New Testament (eg 1 Thessalonians 4:16, James 5:7-9, 1 Corinthians 15:23-24) that we are to expect God to come into our human world a second and final time.

Are we prepared ?

To what extent and in what way(s) are we trying to control events around us, our own lives and destiny?

"God handles the controls and we steer..." How far would you agree or disagree with this statement?

Should we expect God to handle the controls?

How do we balance fulfilling our responsibilities and allowing God to control?

Finally, let's turn to worship.

Maybe start by listening to some Advent music , and advent carol...

We may have noted that those who actually arrive at the cave are not those who might have been expected to be the first to worship Jesus.

Chief priests, scribes (the scholars who had studied the Jewish scriptures) , all are noticeably absent. Instead it is Gentiles who arrive, with gifts, expectation and awe.

Come to God now and offer your gifts of awe and worship. Come with expectation...

Take some time to mull over the thoughts God has prompted during this session.

Praise God that God is in control. Praise God for sending Jesus to be the Light of the world, that his salvation is for you, for your neighbours, for all nations, all people.