

**Matthew 2**  
**The coming King (3)**

It's one of those standard Christmas readings, that you'll hear probably more than once here in December each year. It conjures up those images of Christmas cards - well, the few that still go for something more traditional and religious. We even had one with a **beehive** on it this year! - a friend of ours who has just retired and taken up ... could you guess ...?

But let's stay with the more **traditional picture** for a while at least. And as I've said quite often, when considering this picture, *not* just the three guys on a camel each, but with all the servants and hangers-on that dignitaries from distant lands would have with them.

***Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ...***

(Matthew 2:1)

And not to the manger scene either, to complete the standard set of figures for your school nativity play. I would imagine we're looking at minimum of a year later, and Mary and Joseph and Jesus are now resident in a *house*.

***And going into the house, ...***

(Matthew 2:11)

But the traditions are right about that surprising, disturbing message:

***... saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."***

(Matthew 2:2)

To someone who wasn't properly Jewish, but rather enjoyed having that title "King of the Jews", that spelled trouble indeed. Not at all a *pretender* to that throne, but, even worse, a legitimate claimant. If that's true, the Herod has to give place to the rightful ruler of that land ... which, knowing Herod, he's not going to do without a fight. A fight that could get messy and troublesome for all around.

***When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;***

(Matthew 2:3)

But let's get all the background work done. Is there any local intelligence on this matter? Conveniently, the Scriptures have the answer:

***... and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:***

(Matthew 2:4-5)

And that's curious just for starters, isn't it? If you give credit to these ancient writings claiming to reveal God's plan for the world ... but you then set yourself *against* that plan by *opposing* the person specified in that prophecy ... then this Herod has to be a calculating *disbeliever*, rather than an unbeliever. He believes the prophecy ... but *rejects* it. *No wonder* that the road ahead is going to be unpleasant!

But he hides his snarl behind a genial smile. Perhaps these guys can do some of my work for me. Why spend time ransacking the area if some inadvertent spies can do the job for free?

***And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."***

(Matthew 2:8)

Whatever that star was, they do indeed find their way to the very house. And even if it is the strange mysteries of some pagan religion that has pointed out this miraculous birth, they recognise something greater and truer than anything they have previously encountered.

***And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.***

(Matthew 2:11)

Finally, here is not merely a religion, a system of rules about how to live, a set of ideas about how things are as they are in this world, or wishes about what they could or should be ... but a *person*. God in a body.

***And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.***

(John 1:14)

Those three gifts are finally brought out, treasures of immense value.

***Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.***

(Matthew 2:11)

I have always vaguely rebelled at the way Christmas presents changed as I grew up. When I was a kid, it was **toys**. As I became older, the gifts became more **practical**. And the gifts of these wise men were indeed very practical gifts. Effectively, they were very high-denomination banknotes, but, like those **travellers' cheques** which you used to get, exchangeable in any country. This little baby - this little *family* - was going to have some serious need of finance in the next few months, as they become refugees. We'll come to that in a moment.

But the traditional picture comes to a close with the wise men sneaking off back home *without* informing Herod as to their whereabouts.

***And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.***

(Matthew 2:12)

How do you picture that? I think the more traditional idea is that there was some kind of angel involvement in this dream. We're told that happened as regards Joseph, shortly afterwards:

***... behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream ...***

(Matthew 2:13)

But notice that Matthew records that with a "behold" attention-getter, which he doesn't for the wise men. So I'm just wondering if these wise men are actually guided in what seems a much more natural way. They dreamed. And sometimes dreams are ways of us turning over in our minds things that we haven't consciously spelled out very precisely.

***And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.***

(Matthew 2:12)

Maybe it is just as simple - but still as much God's guidance - as one of the guys waking up in the morning and saying to the others, *You know, I had a really strange dream last night, about that King Herod. On reflection, I'm not so sure that he's someone we should be trusting.* And when one says it, they find that they all had some feelings of wariness and uncertainty about Herod - *Now you come to mention it ...* - and so they decide it is wiser to slip off back home quietly. No big angel in a dream, and a *behold!* Just the experience of royal court life for decades, and a finely-developed sense of smelling a rat.

Folks, don't despise those natural skills that should be developing over the years. Why do you think it is that the leadership of a church is supposed to be the responsibility of the elders, rather than the youngers? Hopefully they *should* have learned a few tricks over the years!

But now see how Matthew reinforces for us that this Jesus is not just the one *born* King, but he is also indeed the *promised* King. We'll hear this from time to time in this book Matthew wrote, with Jesus' Jewish ancestry waved right in front of us, right from the start:

***The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.***

(Matthew 1:1)

And now three scenarios from the early years of Jesus' life are presented to us as fulfillments of those promises and prophecies. Not just that it was in Bethlehem that he was to be born. But see what further transpires around that little town.

- **Run for your life! (13-15)**

It must have been a pretty close-run thing. I wonder whether Herod was keeping tabs on these wise men, and when they didn't return when he expected them to, a very vicious Plan B kicked into play. Just thinking about this now, I wonder whether the wise men decided to slip off under cover of night.

***And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.***

(Matthew 2:12)

Perhaps they have discussed this alternative arrangement during the morning, and, since they have missed the chance to make a very early start on their long journey back, decide to leave as night is falling. And so, after the excitement of the visit has died down, Joseph and Mary put the baby down, and then get an early night themselves. Only not for long ...

***Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."***

(Matthew 2:13)

Don't expect the plan of God to proceed smoothly. We've seen this pattern before, and Egypt was in focus then, too. There was another king, only in Egypt the kings were called Pharaohs. And we were told about another baby in peril of his life, who miraculously escapes, and then goes on to lead his people to freedom.

But never mind that interesting theological theoretical stuff right now. It is drop everything and *run for your life!* Joseph follows the precise commands of the angel - rise, take, flee:

***And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ...***

(Matthew 2:14)

Those gifts from the wise men would pay for their expenses on the way. But the first thing is to be *on* that way - in the night, possibly no more than an hour since the angel popped into Joseph's dreams. And the fourth command from the angel: *remain*. That too:

***... and remained there until the death of Herod.***

(Matthew 2:15)

And now Matthew drops this theological comment on us. We might have thought that the plans were going seriously wrong, with Herod on the rampage. But

no. This fits with other stuff previously written - in this case, over a thousand years back.

***This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”***

(Matthew 2:15)

Elements of the storyline of Moses and the nation of Israel definitely line up in many ways, even if not in every way, with what is happening now to Jesus.

Egypt was *originally* the place of safety, where Jacob and his family went to escape famine. It only morphed into that oppressive regime after hundreds of years.

Moses, as we already mentioned, escapes Pharaoh’s murderous decree, just as Jesus does with Herod’s.

And God spoke of the nation of Israel as “his son”. Right back when Moses was being commissioned to confront Pharaoh, here’s part of what he was to say:

***“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” ‘ ”***

(Exodus 4:22-23)

And the whole episode of the Exodus is summed up by the prophet Hosea - that’s what Matthew is quoting here:

***When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.***

(Hosea 11:1)

And yet Israel, that prototype project, you could think of it as, eventually failed. But here, I think Matthew is trying to hint to us, is *another* son, who is *not* going to fail. *This* son of Abraham, *this* son of David, is going to succeed where Israel didn’t. He will retrace the steps of Israel ... but *not* stumble - as we will see as we read on through the book.

But those steps will not be painless. The world around will still oppose the gracious purposes of God.

- **Weep for your children! (16-18)**

***Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.***

(Matthew 2:16)

That’s what you get with absolute power: the ability to wreak atrocities. Democracy might not be a perfect system, and you only have to listen to the news

reports to be confirmed in that view. But if the greatest abuse of power by the current Conservative regime is to have held those, in context, outrageous Christmas parties this time last year, then we have got off lightly. Look around the world for even your common or garden dictator, never mind a Herod, and ask yourselves if you'd really prefer to live there!

And yet, even that atrocity of Herod 2000 years ago had not been overlooked by God. Hundreds of years earlier, there were verses written that fit perfectly with the massacre of the Bethlehem innocents:

***Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."***

(Matthew 2:17-18)

Jeremiah's times, now those were different. This was when Israel had been a nation for centuries, but had fallen to invasion by the Babylonians. Untold thousands must have perished. And anyone who was anyone, of those left alive, was being deported hundreds of miles away. It was as if the nation was being dismembered.

And **Rachel**? Who was Rachel? I think this has to be a poetic mention of Jacob's wife, Rachel. If Jacob is the one whose name God changed to Israel, essentially the father of the nation that went on to bear his name, then Rachel is the *mother* to the nation. Who will weep as the nation - *her children* - is hacked apart before her very eyes? *Rachel*.

**Ramah**, there, probably approximating to the site from which the deportations left, bearing her children into who knows what dire fate in the lands of pagans.

But run your eyes along the history of Israel, and you will see that God did not forget his people. 70 years later, the world order changes again, and those exiles can return home.

Folks, we can only ever look at our own times - and the catastrophes of our own times - with short sight. Whenever there is some national tragedy, you will hear people say *I'll never forget them! There's not one day of my life that I won't remember this day, and these people!* But in time our memories *will* fade. Yet God remembered his promise to Abraham and his descendants, and restored that nation again. As he promised he would:

***"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; ..."***

(Isaiah 49:15-16)

And doesn't that last phrase there bring you some comfort, when you factor Easter as well as Christmas into your thoughts?

So Joseph has taken Mary and Jesus into a foreign land. But God has not forgotten *them*, either. God's plans have *still* not been wrecked by *Herod the king, in his raging*.

- **Return to your homeland (19-23)**

Herod, that supposedly great king, only merits a few more words in passing here. And his opposition to God's plans, his attempts to murder this child born King of the Jews, simply crumbles away and comes to nothing. He just dies. And time now for another dramatic angelic visitation, with a *behold!*

***But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ...***

(Matthew 2:19)

Another dream. And another message. Very similar to the earlier one, the way it starts off, but totally opposite.

***... saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."***

(Matthew 2:20)

And Joseph once again solidly does exactly what he's told. We don't hear a whole lot about the guy, but goodness, just see how he jumps to it and does all of this Christmas-story stuff without batting an eyelid.

***And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.***

(Matthew 2:21)

I think Matthew must have liked Joseph - though most likely he had never met him. But you can hear the respect he owned in an earlier comment, I think:

***And her husband Joseph, being a just man ...***

(Matthew 1:19)

But he's a canny one, too. Israel in general terms might be safe again ... but there's no point in taking silly risks. The son of Herod might still be something of a chip off the old block - and still sensitive about any potential rival to that "king of the Jews" title. So, whether it's because of another angel, or whatever ...

***But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, ...***

(Matthew 2:22-23)

But the final line of this chapter, I have to say, is a puzzle. Matthew is still telling us that God's plan is fully on track. Despite Herod, despite time in Egypt, God's son is precisely where he should be at that point in time.

***... so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.***

(Matthew 2:23)

But although it sounds like another quote from the OT, it isn't. Notice Matthew says "the prophets", rather than "a" or "the" prophet, and give a name.

I confess it doesn't sit quite so well with me, but it would have been just fine with Jewish readers. The nearest we get to this in English is a pun - and puns are not always thought to be the best of jokes. But to the Jewish mind, word-play, and words that sound alike being used to convey allusive meanings, that was mainstream stuff. Here's an example:

***This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, a basket of summer fruit. And he said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them."***

(Amos 8:1-2)

"Summer fruit" and "end" sound nearly identical in Hebrew. And I think that is what Matthew is doing here at the end of his second chapter, and that place-name Nazareth.

***And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.***

(Matthew 2:23)

There are maybe *three* words that sound alike here, that Matthew might be referring to. First, there's the vow of special consecration to God that you can find in the OT:

***"Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, ...***

(Numbers 6:2)

You can see the potential for a pun there, with Nazirite and Nazareth. But there's another possibility as well. There were prophecies about the royal line of king David being cut down, like a tree, leaving just a stump in the ground. But it could start growing again. And one of the Hebrew words that is used for that idea sounds very similar to Nazareth and Nazirite, too. Here's one of those verses, from early on in the book of Isaiah, clearly looking to the coming of the eventual Messiah. "Branch" here is the Hebrew word *netzer* - very similar sounds again.

***There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.***

(Isaiah 11:1)

Back when there was that famous hurricane that weather-forecaster **Michael Fish** famously denied, a big willow tree in our next-door neighbour's garden went over. They had the trunk sliced into something like two-foot-long sections, but not removed. But these chunks of tree-trunk started **sprouting** again, just standing on the grass in their back garden.

That's a picture of what is happening here with Jesus, I think Matthew is telling us. God's promise of life is so potent that even being chopped down to the ground, it's going to grow again.

Herod can come and try to root it out, but the Son of God merely relocates temporarily to Egypt. And there are those prophecies relating to Egypt. God's plan is on track.

We would maybe argue that something awful like that Bethlehem massacre is just too terrible for God to factor in, but Scripture insists that is not the case. There is a prophecy that fits perfectly even for that atrocity. And God's plan is on track.

And when the Son of God ends up in the back end of beyond, goodness, Nazareth, of all places ... yes, you guessed it, there are prophecies that fit in with that, too. God's plan is on track. Which, of course, is what the NT claims as well:

***But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.***

(Galatians 4:4-7)

God's plan is totally on track. And Christmas is when we remember and celebrate that the coming King, around whom focused all those *hopes and fears of all the years* ... came.