

Matthew 2.1-12

Knowing is not enough

Amington (Online)

Sunday 3 January 2021

Born King

A month I showed this picture that my sister and brother-in-law used to announce they were going to have another child. They shared it with friends on Facebook, and so on – but unfortunately it didn't make the 6 o'clock news or the national press.

When this little guy was born, however, it made a bit more of a stir. I don't know if you recognise him? It might help if I zoom out a little so you can see his parents...

This is Prince George. When *he* was born, it made headlines all over the world. Why? Because he will one day be King.

What's interesting is that the Magi ask for '**the one who has been born king**' – not *prince* or *future* king, but **born king**. No wonder Herod was upset! He wasn't born king – he wasn't even from the line of David – no, he was *made* king, and *kept* king by the power of Rome. No wonder Herod was upset.

The Shepherd King (6)

Herod was a ‘king’ – but this child is a *real* king – in fact he’s *the* King, with a capital K.

Although, the prophecy at the heart of our reading doesn’t use the word ‘king’ at all – did you notice? It uses the word *shepherd*: in Micah 5 God says to Bethlehem, **‘out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel’** (6).

I’m sure you’ve all heard sermons that talk about shepherds being outcasts and outsiders, smelly, untrustworthy – I’ve said it myself! But actually the Bible is only negative about shepherds when God is accusing Israel’s rulers of being *bad* shepherds!

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – they were all shepherds. Moses was a shepherd. King David himself, the great soldier, started out as a shepherd. Israel’s leaders are regularly described as shepherds. Some of the prophets were actual shepherds. Then in the New Testament the angels announce Jesus’ birth to shepherds, and in his first letter Simon Peter describes church leaders as shepherds.

Why?

*1. Shepherds **protect** their flock.*

Shepherds had to be willing to take on or scare off wild animals when they came to attack the sheep under their care. David once talked to King Saul about how he had to fight off bears and lions to protect his father's sheep.

*2. Shepherds **provide** for their flock.*

Shepherds had to find good pasture and fresh water for the sheep under their care. That might sound easy in a country like ours, but in a dry country like Israel this was not so simple. Shepherds had to know where they could find water, in streams or in deep wells.

*3. Shepherds guide their flock on safe **paths**.*

When I walked up Skafell Pike in the summer, there was a sheep on a rock halfway up a practically vertical bit of hillside. How it got there, I do not know. The farmer was really struggling to get to the idiot creature. The sheepdog was doing its best, but kept slipping back down the hillside. The sheep was completely stuck. Eventually the farmer got close enough to prod it with his stick, and it jumped, slid, and fell down to the safe path.

Left to their own devices, sheep get into all sorts of bother. Good shepherds guide their flock on safe paths.

*4. Shepherds are always **present** with their flock.*

Shepherds lived with their sheep on the hillside, even sleeping across the entrance to the sheep-pen. They talked to the sheep, called to the sheep – so much so that the sheep would recognise their voice. Instead of driving sheep from behind as shepherds do today, they would call out, and the sheep would follow the voice.

So, shepherds offered their sheep protection, provision, safe paths, constant presence – remind you of anyone? This is the way David describes God in Psalm 23, which of course begins, **The Lord is my Shepherd**. This is why Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. This is who God is. Far from being outcasts and outsiders then, shepherds model the way God leads and cares for his people – us.

Three sheep with a trench coat wanted to see a film. So, they stood on top of one another and tottered up to the ticket desk.

‘One ticket please,’ said the top sheep.

‘No – I can tell you’re three sheep dressed in a trench coat,’ said the assistant.

‘Really?’ said the top sheep.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘One... two... zzzzzz.’

Responding Badly (3-5, 7-8)

God is the shepherd – we are the sheep – so how are we to respond to our good shepherd? Matthew offers three contrasting responses in this short passage.

First we have Herod: not born-king but made-king, kept in power by the Romans. He was a cunning politician, an ambitious builder, ruthless and selfish. He even had two of his own sons executed for treason so he could hold onto power a little longer.

Therefore Herod's response to Jesus is not surprising; he wanted rid of him: Jesus was at best a nuisance, at worst a serious threat. He deceived the Magi, sent them off to find Jesus and tell him so he could kill him. He didn't send any soldiers with them, no doubt because he didn't want to arouse their suspicion.

And we know what happened next: he was so desperate to be rid of Jesus that he slaughtered all the boys under two in Bethlehem.

Herod was right, and wrong. Jesus had no interest in Herod's 'throne'. But he was – and is – a major threat. Jesus claims to be *the way, the truth, the only way* to God. He allows no rivals – not even you. Some react to that aggressively like Herod, coming out swinging, trying to discredit Jesus, his followers, his church.

Others respond like **the people's chief priests and teachers of the law** (4); they knew exactly where the Messiah would be born – but they didn't care.

If you knew the Queen – or your favourite singer or dancer or actor – had promised to visit Amington Parish Church, only you didn't know exactly when, what would you do if someone told you, 'They're here, right now!'

You'd get up and go, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you? I would!

The **people's** religious leaders and teachers knew the Scriptures, they knew the prophecy – yet the Magi went to Bethlehem alone.

The **chief priests and teachers of the law** couldn't even be bothered to travel 5½ miles to see – for that is how far Jerusalem is from Bethlehem. Was this the coming Messiah, prophesied by all the prophets for centuries? They simply didn't care.

Herod responded to Jesus with opposition – those who knew better responded to Jesus with apathy. One wanted rid of Jesus, the others didn't even care.

In stark contrast to them, we have the Magi – Gentile foreigners, astrologers even! – who travelled hundreds of miles for a *rumour*, who kept going, all because they wanted to see Jesus.

Responding Well (1-2, 9-12)

The three wise men arrived and saw Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. Joseph asked them politely to leave as his wife had just given birth and needed to rest. The first wise man said, ‘Ah, but I have brought gold for the child.’

Joseph thanked him and insisted that they leave now. Then the second wise man said, ‘I have brought frankincense for the child.’

Again Joseph thanked him but was getting annoyed as they were interrupting a special moment between him and his wife. He got up and started to usher them out, when the third wise man said, ‘But wait there’s myrrh!’

Various attempts have been made through the years to identify the **star** of Bethlehem. Halley’s comet was a favourite for a while – only it appeared at completely the wrong time. The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that happened a few weeks ago is another favourite – only none of the suggestions explains how the star *moved and guided* the Magi. It’s almost as if God was able to do something special, something new, for the birth of his Son...

And anyway, all that misses the point, which is not the star – or whatever it was – but how the Magi responded to Jesus.

I mean, look at what happens when the star reappears as they leave Jerusalem and head to Bethlehem:

The star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

Matthew 2.9-10 (NIV)

Now, the NIV translators have toned Matthew down a bit there. It actually says: they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. I picture them skipping along the road, half-walking half-running, beaming with wide smiles, so excited they can barely contain themselves.

And when they found Mary and Joseph and the child they threw themselves on the floor in worship and showered Jesus with lavish gifts, worthy of a king. I don't think we need to worry about what the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh may or may not have symbolised: they were simply the best, the most valuable, the most precious things the Magi had to offer.

These foreigners responded to Jesus as Herod and the chief priests and teachers of the law should have responded to Jesus. These Magi responded to Jesus as *we* should respond to Jesus.

They were curious, travelling great distances to find out more. They were determined, not giving up even when they got it wrong. They rejoiced with exceeding great joy when they realised they were on the right path. They worshipped Jesus when they found him, and gave him the best of what they had. Wow.

Knowing is not Enough

Jesus travelled a long way, setting aside his majesty and his glory to come to us, to live with us, to live among us, to live as one of us. He comes *now* to us, to find us, to bring us home. But knowing that is not enough: *we* have to travel *too*.

James says: **come near to God and he will come near to you** (4.8).

Paul says: **one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on** (Philippians 3.13-14).

Knowing is not enough. Herod knew, and he *opposed* Jesus. The priests and religious leaders knew, and they *didn't care*. The Magi knew and they *worshipped*. They traversed afar – as the carol goes – because they wanted Jesus. Rich with gold, frankincense, and much myrrh besides, the Magi wanted one thing only: Jesus.

May Jesus be *our* One Thing this year, and every year.