

**Matthew 2:1-12 – The (Un)Expected King**  
*St Mark's Northbridge – 27/12/2020 AD*

*Big Idea:* Jesus the king of the Jews is born in Bethlehem  
**Merry Christmas! Pray.**

**The small country town**

A few weeks' ago, I was travelling through regional New South Wales with a friend of mine and we stayed the night in Cootamundra. And Cootamundra is just like most other country towns. It has a main street with at least two pubs. A collection of motels, restaurants, cafes, grocery stores. One hardware store. A public swimming pool. A police station.

All the things you'd expect in a small country town. Nothing too out of the ordinary. Just another town you pass through on your journey.

But there was one thing about Cootamundra which made it unique. As we were leaving we saw a big sign which said "The Birthplace of Bradman". So we followed this sign down the road and came to a house. And this house was the birthplace of Donald Bradman – The Don – the greatest cricketer in history. An Australian hero who was admired just as equally for his skill on the field as well as his character – someone who was humble in victory and gracious in defeat. A hero admired by many here and afar. And a man who you need to know about if you want to become a citizen of Australia – he makes it onto the citizenship test!

And of all places Donald Bradman was born in Cootamundra. A small country town in the middle of nowhere.

You see, Cootamundra is a bit like Bethlehem, the town where Jesus was born.

Bethlehem was a small and ordinary country town with not much going for it. I think we can become so familiar with the Christmas story that we don't think much of Jesus being born in Bethlehem of all places. Why Bethlehem? Because it wasn't the place you would expect a king to be born in. It was a small and insignificant town. A backwater – and even that might be too generous. Bethlehem wasn't a place on most people's bucket lists of places where they must visit in their lifetime.

It was a small and insignificant country town.

And that's what makes the birth of Jesus in **Bethlehem** so astonishing. It's not the place where you'd expect a king to be born.

Now there's a part of this that I think we really like. The thought or story of someone great and successful coming from such humble and lowly beginnings. It's the underdog who no one expects to succeed but goes on to become successful.

Those stories are inspiring.

But there's a part of this which can be extremely unsettling. Especially when our expectations are that those who are successful will follow a certain script of being associated with certain people and moving in the right circles to get ahead.

But then someone comes along unexpectedly and disrupts the system. Our expectations are flipped on their head. What we have assumed turns out to be wrong. It's unsettling.

And when Jesus is born in Bethlehem, it's a moment of great disruption. An anticipated and expected king arrives in an unexpected way in what seems like an unexpected place for a king to be born.

### **The king and the King (v1-2)**

As Matthew tells this story about Jesus being born, he sets his arrival in the context of another king.

From the opening words of this gospel account, Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is a king. Last week we saw in chapter 1 that Matthew calls Jesus the Messiah – he is the anointed one, the Christ, the king. Jesus is a king.

But as Jesus the king is born, Matthew tells us here in our passage in verse 1 that there is another king. That Jesus is born...*during the time of King Herod.*

There are two kings here. It's not the king and the prince, but it's the king and another King. One who has just been born and one who is established on his throne. One who is a mere child, and one who is a fully-grown adult. Two kings from two different families. So there's a tension and a rivalry of two kingdoms that is sure to be played out as the story unfolds.

And as Matthew tells us about these two kings he introduces us to some Magi, or wise men, who are in search of a king. From verse 1 these... *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

These men have come to Jerusalem in search of a king. Who exactly these men are remains a mystery. We're not told where exactly in the east that they've come from. And we're not even told how many of them there are – we often assume there are three wise men because there are three gifts which are mentioned. There could have been 2 of them, or there could have been 10!

And one of the big questions we're left asking about these wise men is why these men as foreigners want to go and worship the king of another country many miles away. Which just goes to show that this is an extraordinary event that Matthew is telling us about!

But we are told that they are foreigners who are searching for the newly born king of the Jews. And that's why they go to Jerusalem – the big capital city of Israel.

If a king of the Jews has been born, then that's where you'd expect to find him. It's human instinct: when you're looking for someone you go straight to where you'd expect to find them.

Just think about our city. If you're looking for someone who holds political power and influence, then you would head to Macquarie Street. If you were looking for a successful businessperson then you would head to a boardroom in the CBD. If you were looking for elite sporting talent, you'd head to Olympic Park. If you were looking for a renowned performer you would head to the Opera House or the State Theatre.

And so if you were looking for a king of the Jews then you would go to Jerusalem. This is where you'd expect to find him. In the big city, at the palace, surrounded by wealth.

But....not this king. He's different. He isn't where you'd expect to find him. As these wise men discover, this newborn king of the Jews isn't found in Jerusalem.

Instead they find King Herod – an established king who can't possibly be the newborn king of the Jews!

He isn't the king they were expecting to find. Because this newly born king of the Jews doesn't follow human instinct and expectations. He's a different type of king. And that's a hint that as this king grows up He will be different to every other king. His kingdom will be different to any other kingdom on earth.

This newborn king of the Jews is not to be found in Jerusalem. And that's because of what has been foretold about this king.

### **The star and the Scriptures (v2-6)**

As these wise men are searching for this newborn king of the Jews, they have been guided by a star that they have seen. Verse 2 tells us that this star is meant to signify the birth of the king of the Jews, and it has prompted these men to go in search of him and worship him.

And again, there are several questions we might have about this star. What was it about this star that made it signify the birth of a king? How did these wise men make the connection between a star and the birth of a king? And is this the Bible endorsing star signs and astrology?

Or maybe for the practical-minded among us, was this star just the first century version of GoogleMaps?

While this star gets lots of attention in the Christmas story, it's a sign that is meant to point us to what has been written in the Scriptures. What this star pointed the wise men to was foretold and written about hundreds of years before in the Old Testament Scriptures.

And we this when Herod hears that these wise men are on a quest to find the king of the Jews. After hearing this, Herod then consults his own wise men to see whether this is true.

Have a look from verse 4:

*<sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied,*

And why is this the case? Because, in verse 5:

*...this is what the prophet has written:*

*<sup>6</sup> "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."*

So out of Bethlehem, this small country town, will come a king. And God has promised that this king will be a shepherd over all Israel. No longer is Bethlehem to be looked on with scorn and derision. But out of this town will come a great king.

I think this would be a bit like saying that if you want to find the next Donald Bradman, then you're not going to find them in an elite talented underage team or private school in Sydney, but you'll find them out in Cootamundra. If you want to find the next greatest cricketer, then you'll find them out in that small country town.

This great king of Israel would come from the small town of Bethlehem. And for God's people Israel, this would have a familiar ring to it.

This year the word 'unprecedented' has been used on so many occasions to describe events that we are going through. Well for Israel, a king coming from Bethlehem is not unprecedented. It's happened before. In fact, Israel's greatest king, King David, was from Bethlehem. This is after all, 'Royal David's City' as we sing in the Christmas carol. He too had humble beginnings and wasn't the king everyone was expecting. And he was God's anointed king who led Israel. He was a shepherd who led Israel.

All of Israel looked back to the glory days of David and longed for one like him to come and rule his people. This was based on prophecies like this one here in verse 6 from Micah: that a shepherd king from Bethlehem would come. This was Israel's great expectation.

As we saw from the genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1, Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is a son of David. And he has just been born in Bethlehem.

Here is the great shepherd king that Israel had been longing for. He has been born in Bethlehem, just as God had promised through the prophets. And he is the shepherd who will rule over his sheep and lay his life down for them, even till death on a cross.

So this king, while not meeting human expectations, is not so unexpected after all. He's the one whom God's people should be expecting.

This star that the wise men see points to what God had spoken of and promised many years beforehand in the Scriptures. These wise men, from a foreign land are swept up in the gospel story of this king being born.

Which adds to the wonder of the Christmas story. That there would be foreigners who travel over great distance to worship the king of the Jews. That God would supernaturally move in these astrologers and stargazers to have them come and worship this king.

You could say that these men are following in the line of those strangers we saw scattered in the Genealogy of Jesus. People from afar who God has brought near to His son Jesus, the king born in Bethlehem.

### **The conflict of Christmas (v3, 10)**

Now this story of a kid from a small town making it big and being a great king can be heart-warming and inspiring. But this episode reveals something confronting about the Christmas story: there is conflict. The arrival of Jesus the King results in a conflict. His arrival signals that there is a new king in town and a new kingdom. And the birth of this king causes division and conflict.

And we can see this through King Herod and the wise men. These two figures give us a window into the conflict of Christmas. They show us the conflicting responses that the birth Jesus brings.

Firstly King Herod. Do you see there in verse 3:

*King Herod is disturbed,*

Herod is troubled by this news that Jesus is born. Jesus threatens his reign as king.

And not just Herod, but in verse 3:

*and all Jerusalem with him.*

You see, the arrival of Jesus is disturbing news not just for the rulers and powers but for the rest of culture and society. When Jesus arrives he signals to the world that He is King and that he rules the world. And that's why Herod is disturbed and troubled by this news. It's news that shows he is not in charge.

Even when it's revealed from the Scriptures that God's king would be born in Bethlehem, this still proves too uncomfortable and inconvenient for Herod. It's interesting here that Herod doesn't deny the truth of what the Scriptures say, but he suppresses it. He calls the wise men in secret. Herod's problem is not with the reliability of the Scriptures but with what it says. That he is not the one in charge. That God has a king who has been born in Bethlehem.

And if we're honest, there's a bit of Herod in all of us. We like to think that we are the ones in charge. That we rule our lives and no one else should tell us how to live our lives. But when Jesus is born, God is telling the world "No, you are not in charge. But I am". And that Jesus is the one who rules the world. And not only that, but he will save the world from the curse of our sin and self-rule.

And that's the sharp point of the Christmas story. That we don't rule the world. But Jesus does!

So does that news disturb you like it did for Herod? Does it make you feel uncomfortable? Are you troubled by this news?

Well the wise men show us what we should do when hearing this news that Jesus is the newborn king. Their response conflicts with Herod. We see in verse 10 that:

*<sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

In the original it is literally that they joyfully rejoiced. This sense of joy upon joy. Which is a far cry from Herod. While he was disturbed, they were delighted. Two conflicting responses to the news that Jesus is king.

And it didn't stop there with the wise men. In verse 11:

*<sup>11</sup> .....they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

The joy of these wise men at the birth of Jesus translated into action. They had finally reached the destination: they came and worshipped the king. They humbled themselves

before this baby because they knew that He was the king.<sup>1</sup> And they gave him gifts: Gold, frankincense, and myrrh – gifts for a king who is worthy of them.

These men show us how to respond to Jesus. They aren't disturbed by Jesus, but they are delighted. They aren't terrified that Jesus has come but they are thrilled.

And the wise men show us what it means to worship Jesus. That it means we humble ourselves before Jesus. That we recognise that He is the king who God has sent to rule the world. It's not up to Jesus to meet our expectations, but for us to treat Him as God's expected king. That we live our lives under His lordship. That we worship Him as King.

And the wise men show us what it looks like to worship Jesus. That it is wholehearted and costly. They travelled from a far country and over many miles to come and worship Jesus. And no doubt they would have been subjected to ridicule and being mocked – 'Why are you following a star to find the king of the Jews?' 'Why would you use your time in this way?'

Maybe you've heard something similar: 'Why would you use your Sunday to meet with and serve God's people?' – 'Why would you spend your Friday nights at youth group?'

Worshipping Jesus is costly. But it's an honour when you know that you are living for the king.

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, this is another place in the New Testament which shows Jesus' divinity. The wise men are bowing down and worshipping Jesus – a practice reserved only for deity. If Jesus was a mere human then this would be scandalous.

And of course, the wise men gave their gifts, their treasures to Jesus. Their valuable possessions given to this newborn king. Again, you can imagine their friends when they returned home, saying: “You gave your treasures to a baby? Are you crazy!”

In the world’s eyes, giving everything for Jesus seems ridiculous.

Maybe someone has said to you: “You give your money to support the work of the gospel around the world? Are you crazy!”

Worshipping Jesus comes at a cost. But it’s an honour when you know that you are living for the king.

It’s wonderful that at the end of each year over Christmas we get this wonderful vision of who Jesus is. We are reminded that he’s the king. So as we embark on another year, and as you might be making resolutions or setting goals for 2021, I wonder how worshipping Jesus and giving your all for Him fits into your goals and plans for the following year? Or do your goals and plans need to be oriented around Him?

It is an immense privilege that God gives us the eyes to see that Jesus is the king of kings who he has sent to rule and save the world. So why wouldn’t we want to give our all to Jesus like these wise men did.

**Let’s Pray.**