

# Christmas Service

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Preacher: Alex J MacDonald

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn now to Matthew chapter 2. I'd like to read the first three verses. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed. And all Jerusalem with him. These words were, first of all, an urgent question.

Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? At first, I'd like to ask the question, Who was it who asked this question in the first place?

They were given here in the New International Version a very mysterious name, Magi, known more usually to us as the wise men.

What exactly did this word mean? Because Magi is simply the actual Greek word that was used here to describe these people. Who were these mysterious characters who came from the east and were there to give gifts to the baby Jesus?

[ 1 : 17 ] Well, as far as we can make out, Magi were people, especially, as is obvious from this, who studied the stars, among other things.

And they were renowned for being kind of wise men, or what we perhaps today would call scientists. And in fact, the science of astronomy was actually started by these people in Persia and in Babylonia.

And it's probably from that kind of area, from either Persia or Babylon, that these wise men came. They were people who had a great stress upon studying the heavens and looking at the stars and trying to figure out what all these things meant.

Now, of course, they would have had a lot of superstitions, along with simply studying the movement of the stars. And probably also what we call modern-day astrology, the actual idea that you can find out what's going to happen through studying the stars.

That idea also came from these men in the ancient world. So they had probably a mixed bag of beliefs and ideas about the world in which they lived.

[ 2 : 37 ] They came, as I've said, from the east and probably from quite some distance, certainly over a thousand miles, probably, to come to the land of the Jews, if they were coming from Persia or even from Babylon.

We're also told here when all of this took place because the Bible is very careful to make it clear that these things that we're reading about are not fairy tales.

They're things that really happen. And so Matthew mentions a very real historical person, and that is King Herod. He says that all this took place during the time of King Herod.

Now, that doesn't pinpoint it very exactly for us today, and we're still not quite sure as to the exact dates of when these things happened, but we know pretty well exactly the time when it did take place because we're told King Herod was ruling.

And he's well known through some of the historians who were writing at that time, people like the Jewish historian Josephus. He writes a great deal about King Herod, so we know quite a lot about him.

[ 3 : 50 ] And we're told also that they came when or after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. Now, it's important to remember that as well because sometimes I know we've got a lot of these things about the birth of Jesus all jumbled up in our minds together, shepherds and wise men and stars and angels and all the rest of it.

But in fact, if you look very carefully at what the Gospels say, you can sort of make a reconstruction of what happened and you can see the order of events in which they must have happened.

Now, this coming of the wise men happened after Jesus was born. It doesn't say actually how long after, but it must have been some time after because we see that Jesus, the baby Jesus, is no longer in the stable, but he is in fact in a house.

That's made clear in this passage that we read. On coming to the house in verse 11, they saw the child. In other words, he was no longer there in the stable where he was born.

They'd managed to move into somewhere else, but still in Bethlehem. And they were probably still in that region because, as Luke tells us, sometime, about 40 days after Jesus was born, they had to go up to the temple to make some sacrifices there because Jesus was the firstborn son.

[ 5 : 14 ] So all of these things took place. So we're talking in terms of a few weeks after the birth of Jesus when the wise men actually came. So that gives us some idea of what was going on here.

And then we're told, also, where this question was asked. And that's quite important as well. It was asked in Jerusalem because these Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

Now we might say, well, to what better place could they have come than to Jerusalem? They obviously were looking for a king, a new king being born, and so obviously they went to the capital city of that country, to Jerusalem.

And they were quite right in doing that. Even though they perhaps didn't know a lot of the details of what it says in the Old Testament, otherwise they might have known the passage that talked about him being born in Bethlehem.

But they thought, well, if we go to Jerusalem, we'll surely get someone there who's able to put us right about these things. And so it was. They there heard what the Old Testament actually had to say.

[ 6 : 27 ] And they quoted this passage about Bethlehem and the land of Judah. Out of you will come a ruler, who will be the shepherd of my people Israel. So they went to the right place to hear the word of God, to hear what God had to say concerning the birth of this very special person, the king of the Jews.

But although they went to the right place and they got the right information, as we'll see later on, they didn't really get the right reaction or the reaction you would have expected.

they didn't get people all being overjoyed by the news that their king, their Messiah, was born. But rather, as we'll see later on, when they heard this, they were disturbed, they were troubled.

But let's look more particularly at this question that they asked, this urgent question. They came to Jerusalem not just for a holiday, not just to sightsee, but they came with a very urgent request, and that was, where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

Where is this king that has just been born? Now, the expression the king of the Jews is one that perhaps we're very familiar with, this idea of Jesus being called the king of the Jews.

[ 7 : 48 ] But in fact, what would this name have meant to people living at that time? That's really the question we've got to ask. What would it have meant when they said the king of the Jews?

Well, it would have, in fact, meant something along the lines of what we think today as well, only they wouldn't have thought immediately of Jesus because Jesus had only been born.

What they would be thinking about was the Messiah. That is, they knew that the Jewish people had great promises concerning a great king who was going to come.

Now, we're told by some of the Roman historians that that idea that the Jews were going to have a great king that was going to come was an idea that was known right throughout the Eastern world, not just by the Jewish people themselves.

And that may have been because the Jewish people were scattered all over the earth at that time. They were scattered throughout the different cities, certainly right into the east as well as into the west in places like Rome.

[ 8 : 56 ] They were there in Persia and in Babylon as well. And from early times, from the times, for example, of Daniel, Daniel who was recognized as one of the wise men of Babylon, and these ideas that he believed in, that he had revealed to him concerning the coming of a great king, the Messiah, these are ideas that were known not only by the Jews themselves, but by the people living around them.

So these wise men came from that kind of background where they had heard of this great one, the king of the Jews. And that is the expression that they had come to ask about, the king of the Jews.

And it's an expression that is used of Jesus himself, not only at his birth, as he did, but also when he dies upon the cross. Because you remember how Pilate nailed up above the cross of Jesus the title in three languages, Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews.

And we must remember that when we talk about the Lord Jesus, we are talking about the one who is the king of the Jews, the long-promised, long-awaited for Messiah.

These men then came with this question, where is this one? Where is this king of the Jews? And that's a very great question for ourselves today, particularly, as I was mentioning to the children already, at this time of year.

[ 10 : 33 ] There's so much extra, so much totally unrelated to the whole idea of the birth of Jesus, that people connect with Christmastime.

All the tinsel, we may say, that is of really no importance whatsoever. And we need some wise men from the East, perhaps, to come amongst us today, and to ask, where is the one who was born king of the Jews?

To remind us of the great central truth, that this one that God had promised has indeed now come. and what we need to know is to know what his coming means and what he has done for us by coming into this world.

Well, then, secondly, we noticed that these wise men gave an amazing explanation because, they said, they had come asking this question for a particular reason.

Something had caused them to come all that way to Jerusalem. They say, we saw his star in the East. We saw his star.

[ 11 : 46 ] That's why we're here. We didn't just sort of come on an off chance. We didn't just come just through our own ideas. But something happened in the world, the world with which we're very familiar, that we interpreted as a sign.

We saw his star and that's why we're here. Now, first of all, let's think about that expression, his star. We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him.

The first question that we all want to know, we all want to know the answer to, is what was this star? What kind of thing was it that these wise men saw and interpreted as a sign of the birth of Jesus?

Well, there have been various ideas as to what it might have been. we don't exactly know because, of course, none of us today saw that star or none of the scientists living today saw that star.

Telescopes weren't invented then to study that star. So, we're only really guessing as to what kind of thing it was. Some people have guessed it might have been a comet as something that appears every so often and sometimes can be very, very bright in the sky with a long tail behind it.

[ 13 : 01 ] Others have guessed it was a conjunction of two or, if not three, planets all coming together in the same place in the sky therefore causing a very bright light and there's evidence that that happened around this time.

Also, there's evidence from as far away as China where people also studied the stars that there was what we would call today a supernova at that time.

That is a star that suddenly gets extremely bright so that it would dominate the whole night sky. There's evidence that that happened around this time. But again, we don't know exactly what it was.

It might have been any one of those things. But the point is that it was something so dramatic that these men interpreted it according to their own ideas.

They interpreted it as a sign of the birth of a great one and particularly the birth of this great king of the Jews of whom they knew.

[ 14 : 04 ] Now, of course, we don't know on what basis they interpreted it in that way. It may be that according to their ideas, there's some evidence for this. The sky was divided up into certain areas that represented areas of the world.

And so, where this star appeared, that represented to them some great event in the land of the Jews. And of course, the great event that the Jews are waiting for was the birth of their Messiah.

But at any rate, what we see is that however this happened, God caused it to happen. This event, whatever it was, whether it was a supernova coming into existence or a star suddenly getting brighter or whatever, it was caused at that particular moment of time by God who is in control of this universe.

So that that star, whatever it was, was caused by God to happen as a birth announcement for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice the wise men call it His Star. What an astonishing expression. His Star. A star particularly and forever linked with the birth of Jesus Christ.

[ 15 : 24 ] Now, when we think about birth announcements, we're familiar with all different kinds. Usually, a birth announcement gets put in the newspaper so that everybody is interested can see that somebody has had a baby recently.

Perhaps, if someone is very important, their birth might be mentioned on the television. For instance, Prince William or Prince Harry, their birth would be mentioned on the television that a prince was born.

But someone who is far more important than any of these, his birth announcement was a star. A star pouring so much light out into the universe that perhaps there's just no way of us measuring that tremendous amount of power and light that one of these great stars pours out into the universe.

That was the birth announcement of Jesus Christ. His star, we saw his star in the east. Now, this reminds us of one or two interesting things.

For instance, first of all, this reminds us that God speaks to each one in an appropriate way. We notice that when he spoke to the shepherds on the hills around Bethlehem, he spoke to them by an angel.

[ 16 : 50 ] He spoke to them in an appropriate way for Jewish shepherds so that they would recognize that this was some great announcement from God, an angel appearing, because that's something that rarely ever happened.

They could look back at certain times in the history of their people and see that at certain great important moments, an angel appeared with some great news or some command, and here it was happening to these Jewish shepherds so that they would know what kind of event this was and how tremendous it would be.

But when God wanted to speak to Gentile astronomers studying the stars away there in Persia or in Babylon, he spoke to them by a different method.

He spoke to them by a star. He spoke to them in their own language, according to their own ideas. Some of their ideas may have been mistaken, but he spoke to them in those terms that they could understand so that they could come to the conclusion this is heralding the birth of the King of the Jews.

Now that's very important because we all need to be spoken to in our own language, people. And the Bible is full of all different kinds of ways in which God spoke to different people.

[ 18 : 11 ] It's no stereotyped way in which he comes to people. Even the Lord Jesus, the same glorious person, yet he would deal with different people in different ways, meeting them at their own particular point of need.

When he healed people, he didn't always heal them in a stereotype fashion. sometimes he would touch people. Sometimes he would, like the deaf and dumb man, he would put his fingers into his ears and he would touch his tongue and things like that.

Other times he would do something different because Jesus always did what was appropriate and understandable to that particular person. So we see the same principle at work here.

The Lord Jesus, his birth being made known to these men from very far away perhaps with some confused ideas but making known to them in terms that they could understand so that they would come there to the birth of Jesus.

And that reminds us that there are indeed many ways for us to come to the Lord Jesus. Now, be very careful about that expression.

[ 19 : 21 ] I did not say there are many ways for us to come to God. There is only one way for us to come to God because the Bible makes it quite clear. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father but by me. There is only one way to God and that is Jesus. But there are many ways of coming to Jesus. People don't always come in the same stereotype fashion.

Some people are drawn to the Lord Jesus. Some people are drawn because perhaps of their curiosity. These wise men, obviously, part of it was their curiosity.

They were drawn to see this one that was long promised. Perhaps sometimes we're drawn to him because of our own loneliness, our own feelings of inadequacy.

We're drawn to this one who so obviously cares for people and came into this world to do something for us that we could not do for ourselves. perhaps we may be driven to him.

[ 20 : 25 ] We may be driven to him by a consciousness of our own guilt, even by a fear, a fear even of hell itself. We may be driven to the Lord Jesus by those kinds of feelings and experiences.

There may be different ways in which we may come to him in the first instance. But having come to him and having accepted him as our Lord and Savior, then from that point on we go on to learn and learn more of what he has done for us and all of what he means for us.

So there may be different ways in which we may come, different experiences that we may have as we come to the Lord Jesus. And no one should despise those different ways of coming, those different kinds of experience and say that everybody has got to have the same stereotype or dramatic kind of experience of coming to Jesus.

The important question is, what think you of Christ now? What is your attitude to Christ now? Do you love him? Do you trust him? Do you want to serve him?

That is the important question. And if we can answer yes to these questions, that is what makes us a committed and a professing Christian, not any experiences or any set way in which we may have come to him in the past.

[ 21 : 52 ] So then, these words, we have seen his star, we saw his star in the east. They remind us of these very important truths. These wise men came in a very unusual way, but they came nonetheless to Jesus.

And they came, as we see next, for a very definite purpose. We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. They came there to Jerusalem, not only out of curiosity.

They came not just because they saw a glorious star and they thought it might be interesting to see this one whose birth announcement this was, but they came with the very definite purpose of worshipping that one.

In other words, they had sufficient knowledge even before they came to Jerusalem, even before they came to a full understanding of some of what the Old Testament said about this one.

They had a clear understanding that this one to be born was one worthy of their worship. This one born into the world was someone who was greater than any other one.

[ 23 : 09 ] He was the king of the Jews and they were coming to worship him as their king and we may say as their God because the word that is used here for worship is the word that is rightly used for the worship of God.

Now that tells to us that these wise men, they had perhaps a deeper understanding of who this one coming into the world was than many of the Jewish people who should have been prepared and should have been waiting for this one to come.

Now there's something a little bit mysterious as to how exactly they came to that great knowledge. I've mentioned already the Jewish people being scattered in all these different areas and no doubt through that they had some contact with what the word of God said but even then, even allowing for them, the Jewish people themselves were not expecting the son of God coming among men as the Messiah.

yet these Gentile astronomers they did. Their clear purpose was to come and to worship him and their worship is evidenced by what they did when they actually came to see Jesus and when they actually saw him there and they worshipped him.

We're told that they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, of incense and of myrrh. Now I don't think it's reading too much into this to see in those gifts something specific about their worship of him because these things are mentioned specifically.

[ 24 : 49 ] They're drawn to our attention. They didn't just give him anything. They could have but they specifically gave him gold, incense and myrrh.

When we ask the question in biblical terms, what do these things mean? We come to see that quite clearly these three items are connected with very definite ideas.

First of all, gold in scripture is constantly linked with the idea of kingship. Gold is something that is linked with the king. Gold is fitting for the king.

So they were coming there to acknowledge him as king. Not only king of the Jews, but their own king. Now that really is the same question that we're confronted with today and the same item of the gospel that we have to respond to.

The gospel proclaims to us that the king of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah of the Jewish people, the Jewish people that despised people, that people who still to this day are despised, this king of this particular people.

[ 26 : 03 ] He is to be recognized not just as their king, not just as their Messiah, but he is to be recognized as the king of the world and he is to be recognized as your king and mine.

So these wise men in coming to worship the king of the Jews, they are a great example to every one of us that we personally for ourselves are to recognize this promised Messiah of the despised Jewish people as none other than the God appointed king who rules over the whole of this universe and one day will judge it.

We are to recognize him now as king and lord, to obey him and to serve him and to love him. This is what these wise men were acknowledging when they gave him a gift of gold, but also they gave him a gift of incense.

Now again always in the Old Testament incense is connected specifically with God. Incense is something appropriate to the worship of God. That's why it was used in the temple.

So when they came offering him incense, there seems here a clear indication that they were offering him worship as God. This word is used of their worship as the word is used normally of the worship of God.

[ 27 : 30 ] And so they were acknowledging him not only as a man, not only even as a great man, the great lion of the tribe of Judah, the king of the Jews, but they were recognizing him as the son of God come into this world to do the great work that he had been sent to do.

And also they gave him myrrh. Now again if we look carefully at what is said in scripture about myrrh, we discover that it is almost constantly linked with man, and particularly what we may call with mortal man, the emphasis being on the fact that man dies.

Because myrrh so often is connected with burial. Myrrh was the substance that was used to embalm a body when it was being buried.

And here this thought also surely is uppermost, that they were presenting him not only with gold for being a king, with incense for being the son of God, but they were presenting him with myrrh, because they recognized that he was man, and they recognized that he was in this sense mortal man, that he had come to die.

Now again it would seem here that these wise men, if our understanding of these things is correct, they had a clearer and deeper understanding of what the Lord Jesus came to do than many of their Jewish contemporaries.

[ 29 : 03 ] But at any rate, they worshipped him in this way, worshipping him as king, worshipping him as God, and worshipping him as the God-appointed man who came into this world, not just to be born as a baby, but to die upon the cross to take away the sins of the world.

These wise men, then, they were a great example to the people living at that time, if only they had taken notice. But a great example to us today, because what we are challenged with today by the word of God, is whether we recognize this one as king, king of the Jews, and king in our hearts.

Well, finally, we have a very predictable reaction to all of this. In verse 3, when King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Now, at first sight, we might be a little bit taken aback, that when these wise men came from the east, saying that the king of the Jews was born, that the effect it had on Jerusalem was that Jerusalem was troubled and disturbed, that King Herod, the king ruling over that country, was disturbed.

The greatest news that could ever be announced to the Jewish people, and yet they were disturbed. Well, of course, it's not so difficult to understand. In fact, when we know the situation, it is indeed a very predictable reaction, because King Herod, well, he was already king of the Jews.

- [ 30 : 46 ] And he didn't want another king of the Jews coming along to take his place. When we know a little bit about King Herod, we can begin to understand the reaction that takes place as recorded here by Matthew.

King Herod had been king of the Jews for about 33 years at this stage, and he wasn't likely to give up that rule over the Jews so easily, although at this very time he was actually dying.

The extent of King Herod's almost manic grip upon kingship is demonstrated by the fact that he not only killed off every likely contender for the throne that was unconnected with himself, but particularly he killed three of his own sons, and he killed one of his own wives, because they were the last remaining remnant of the Hasmonean dynasty, the dynasty of kings that had descended from the great Maccabees, the liberators of the Jews when they liberated them from the Syrians in the time before the New Testament was written.

He killed them off because they were the last remaining ones of that dynasty. Such was his absolute ruthless jealousy of his own kingship over the Jewish people.

So what is recorded here by Matthew is not at all as unlikely as some people try to make out about Herod killing these babies, these children in the Bethlehem area.

- [ 32 : 37 ] This is exactly in character with Herod, the kind of thing he would do. When he heard that there was one born king of the Jews, his reaction was at first, of course, to pretend that he was very interested, to pretend that he was happy, to pretend that he was going to go to worship him too.

But his reaction in the end was a ruthless attempt to destroy this one born into the world to be king of the Jews. Now this also has a lesson for us.

We see in verse 8 that King Herod, as I mentioned, pretended interest in the birth of the Christ. He pretended enthusiasm that he would go and worship him.

Yet all the time, according to his clear character, he was scheming to try to destroy this one who he saw as a challenger for him.

Now that is a lesson in this regard, that it's very easy for people to go along with the things that appear to be interesting or attractive in the Christian religion.

- [ 33 : 55 ] It's very easy for people at this time of year to go along with the whole idea of a baby being born in Bethlehem. It's very easy for people to be kind of sentimental about the idea of this baby lying in a manger.

It's very easy for people really to pretend that they are going along with what Christianity is. But Christianity is not simply about a baby in a manger.

And King Herod, for all his faults, he understood that. For all his faults, King Herod understood quite clearly what is involved in someone being born a king of the Jews.

He recognized that here was one who would not tolerate any others to be king of the Jews, but would make an exclusive claim to be that long-awaited Messiah.

And he would grow up to be the one who would indeed destroy all the kingdoms of this world eventually. And so King Herod was absolutely ruthless in his opposition.

- [ 35 : 10 ] People today may try to water down Christianity to just some kind of attractive idea of a baby born in a stable lying in a manger.

And try to remove all the other aspects. Try to remove all the other aspects that perhaps are a little bit more disturbing. But we cannot do it. Because this one has been born as King of the Jews.



Born as the one who is the anointed of the Lord. That Lord who sits in heaven and laughs at those who oppose him and try to overcome his work in this world.

He is the one of whom it is said in Psalm 2 that the kings of the earth are to kiss him lest in his anger he dashes them in pieces.

King Herod understood something of what was involved and he wanted none of it. He wanted to be on the side of that great dragon that we've been reading about in Revelation, the devil himself, who sought to destroy the child.

[ 36 : 20 ] immediately he was born into this world. Well of course we know that that reaction of Herod's was absolutely futile because God preserved the boy Jesus to do the work that he came into the world to do.

But it's a challenge for us today to consider for ourselves what is our reaction? Is our reaction that of the wise men or that of Herod? It was easy for Herod to pretend that he was interested to go along with the whole idea of this being a cause of rejoicing, to pretend that he would go and worship him and all the time he was not accepting.

Is that our reaction or is it our reaction rather the same as the wise men's? That they came genuinely, sincerely to worship this one, to give up, if necessary, all their wrong and past ideas and to worship this one as their saviour and God.

That was what the wise men came to do and that is their great example for us today. To worship and acknowledge this one as our King and our Lord.

Let us pray. Amen. Our gracious Lord, we do thank you that you have revealed all these things to us, that you have spoken in your word and told us that we need a saviour, that we need a king, that we need one who is our God to save us and to keep us for all time to come.

[ 38 : 12 ] We thank you for the wonderful way in which he did come and we thank you for what we may have learned from these words we've read together today. Lord, we pray that the challenge of your word would cause us to indeed worship you and serve you and to seek to work for our great King, the Lord Jesus.

O Lord, we thank you indeed for the great miracle of his birth into the world. And as we think of that great and unique and miraculous birth, we also remember the great fact of the birth of every one of us and of human, ordinary children into this world.

Lord, we thank you for that great gift. And we pray that you would indeed bless those who at this moment perhaps are expecting children or who are looking forward to their children being born.

gracious Lord, we ask that you would uphold them and keep them. And we thank you, Lord, for all the children in our own congregation, that each one of us might rejoice for these little ones, that they might be growing up amongst us to know the Lord Jesus as their Savior and their Lord.

We ask all of these things in his name and for his sake. Amen. Now we're closed by singing in Psalm 72 from verse 10.

[ 40 : 01 ] The tune is St. Ethelreda, number 111. The kings of Tarshish and the isles, to him shall presents bring, and unto him shall offer gifts, Sheba's and Seba's king.

From verse 10 to verse 15 of Psalm 72 to God's praise. Let's stand to sing. Let's stand to sing. Let's stand to sing.

The kings of Tarshish and the isles, to him shall presence bring, and unto him shall offer gifts, Sheba's and Seba's.

unto him shall all forgive, Sheba's and Seba's King.

Yea, all the mighty kings on earth, before him thou shalt fall.

[ 41 : 14 ]    And all the nations of the world do service to him shall.  
                  For he the needy shall preserve when he to him doth call.  
                  The poor also and him that hath no help of man at all.  
                  The poor man and the indigent in mercy he shall spare.  
                  He shall preserve the mind, and the souls of those that needy are.

[ 42 : 35 ]    All from busy and violence, their soul he shall set free.  
                  And in his sight, my precious man in the blood shall be.  
                  Yea, he shall live, and him to him shall be, O see the storm.  
                  For he still shall decry and him shall be.

                  And in his sight, my dear, the earth's door. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of  
                  God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of you now and forever.

[ 43 : 57 ]    Amen.