

Epiphany Reflections 2022 (SC)

Introduction

Tonight we are going to look at Matthew chapter 2, to see how the story of the wise men is shaped by the theme of power. There are those who desire the power of the Lord, those who acknowledge the power of the Lord, and those who obey the power of the Lord.

While the theme of power is evident in the text itself, I also wanted to focus on power, since it is clear that it is something we are deeply suspicious of - of those who wield it, of how we can be changed by it, and the injustices that can befall those who do not have it. Our understanding of power begins from where we are, from the structures of human society past and present. Starting from collective human experience, we look outward, and have so become critical of the idea of an "all-powerful" God. We project our own human inadequacies on to God and say, "if power corrupts us, imagine what it must do to God!" Tonight, I want to reverse that direction of travel, and ask, "do the ways in which we use and sometimes abuse power, define what it means for God to have power and to be power?"

Reflection 1: One *Born* King?

Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi make a brief appearance in the pages of Scripture. They turn up on Herod's door-step, stir up a hornet's nest, and leave. That's it. But their contribution to Matthew's gospel should not be measured by the number of words they take up in the New Testament. Their theological impact is enormous. This story, which sits at the start of the New Testament, says quite clearly, "the Good News is for outsiders." Strangers from the East are just as much part of God's story as his chosen nation Israel. Good News, it seems, is good news wherever you're from.

And if you were to think of Matthew's gospel as a filmscript, the wise men have just the one line:

"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."

There is a lot to be said for their straight-talking, straightforward approach. But I wonder, how wise were they, or at least, how shrewd were they, if they really thought Herod wouldn't be phased by their message?

You see, kings were not born - at least not in historic Israel. They were appointed and then anointed. No one was born king. Even at this point in time, regional kings were installed by the Emperor. Kings weren't born. In the UK, we tend to read this gospel with the British system of monarchy in mind, we tend to think of hereditary succession. Not so in Israel, at least not in the clear, peaceful way we expect of our Royal family. Herod the Great wasn't born king, he was made king in 40BC by the Emperor. And yet here are strangers from another country, another culture, saying *where is he who was born King of the Jews, we wish to worship him.*

Here's the important nuance: the magi want to worship the new-born king, not for what he has *done*, but rather simply for who he *is*. Kings in the ancient world sought to build their legacies based on their achievements, to be remembered as a patron of the arts, or as builders, conquerors,

poets, philosophers. And yet here is one *born* to be king, who hasn't so much as lifted a finger, and yet is worthy of worship. The magi wish to worship the new-born king, not for what he has done, but rather simply for who he is. You see, Christ did not inherit an office, he *is* the office, Christ did not inherit power, he *is* power. No one made Christ King, he simply *is* King.

The Magi understood this - how exactly they should be so sure of their faith we can't say. It's likely that they inherited the Jewish scriptures from the diaspora, the Jewish communities living to the east from the time of the great exile, but even so, we have to say that surely the Holy Spirit was at work to grant to the Magi a special gift, a real clarity of vision, to see God's rule in the midst of the political intrigue and schemes of the 1st century.

At the start of this year, the Magi's clarity of focus stands before us as a challenge. This year, will you acknowledge Christ as King?

Reflection 2: Whose Kingdom?

Matthew 2:13-18

Let's imagine again, that the story of the Epiphany is a play or film production. In many respects, Herod would be the leading man. He has the most lines, he is central to the plot, and he gets most of the limelight. But there can be no denying, he is the "bad guy." I want to set this in some historical context, to give you an insight into what sort of despot we are talking about.

You should know first of all, that Herod the Great was not in fact Jewish. That's important. On his father's side he was a descendant of Edomites, in the far South – not a shining credential at all. On his Mother's side Herod was pretty much as Eastern as the wise men themselves, heralding as she did from the Arabian Peninsula. So here is Herod, of a dubious lineage, perhaps even a little uncertain of the customs and history of the people he now ruled. And the wise men ask, *where is the one who born king of the Jews?* Now we begin to understand how this question might have stung more deeply than the Magi intended.

As an illustration, if someone came up to me in church and asked, "where's the vicar?" I would probably feel a little insecure. "No, not you Simon, you know *the* vicar? The *real* vicar." It would certainly put me on the back foot. Now imagine this question being asked of someone who had sentenced no fewer than three of his sons to death to protect his own throne. Once Herod the Great was in power, there was nothing he would not do to keep it.

Funnily enough, the massacre of the innocents, as it is referred to in art and literature, the killing of the children of Bethlehem, never features in school productions of the nativity. It is a grotesque reminder of how brutal the world can be. Even today, there are those willing to commit the most abominable crimes to stay in power.

When wielding power, when "being powerful" becomes part of our self-image, we are on a slippery slope. Power and identity are a toxic mix. Even in church life, we can find an unhealthy sense of affirmation in the roles and ministries we hold. *I'm* the vicar. *I'm* the warden. *I'm* the treasurer. *I'm* the choir master. Herod's despotism is warning. Those who long for power for power's sake will always feel threatened by Christ. Although we do not occupy the corridors of power as Herod did, while we don't plot and scheme, to secure our own influence on current affairs, it is important to take stock. It is good to ask, for whose glory do I do this. For whose glory

do I serve as vicar, as warden, as treasurer, as choir master? Would I be willing to set these things aside for the sake of God's Kingdom? So, at the start of 2022:

- 1) Do you acknowledge Christ as King?
- 2) Whose Kingdom are you building?

Reflection 3: To be a Dreamer **Matthew 2:19-23**

Have you ever noticed how the New Testament often echoes or reflects something of the Old? We see this clearly on Christmas Day, when we have that wonderful reading from the beginning of John's gospel, *In the beginning was the Word*. It is a retelling of the first lines of Genesis, only it makes clear how Jesus is and always has been the central figure in human history. Indeed, there are plenty of other parallels between the Old and New Testaments, many of which go unnoticed. Here's one I want to share with you this evening.

In the Old Testament, we meet a young man called Joseph. One of the things that really sets Joseph apart are his dreams. Joseph had visions, and not only that, in his adult life it seems he could interpret them too. Forget his coat of many colours, Joseph was the dreamer *par excellence*. In fact, the only one who we might say could challenge him for the title, is the Joseph we meet at the start of the Matthew's gospel: Joseph, the foster parent of the Messiah.

Typically, in the run-up to Christmas, we tell the nativity story through the eyes of Luke's gospel. Luke has the angels, the annunciation to Mary, the "no room at the inn" motif, and the shepherds. Matthew, however, tells the story more from Joseph's point view. And Joseph, like his Old Testament namesake is a dreamer. In a dream, God tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife, for the child is not the result of infidelity but a gift of the Spirit. In a dream Joseph is warned to take the child to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. In a dream Joseph is told to settle in Nazareth, so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. Joseph was a dreamer, but that didn't mean he had his head in the clouds. Although we know relatively little about him, we can at least say this: Joseph was a man of action.

Herod desired power of the Lord, the Magi acknowledged power of the Lord, but Joseph obeyed the power of the Lord. Joseph followed the call of God. But let's be frank; this was no easy thing. It was a call to hard life. He became a refugee, the head of an immigrant family. When he returned to his country, he settled in a town that was not his own. Joseph did all this, because he obeyed the power of the Lord. At the start of this new year, I ask:

- 1) Do you acknowledge Christ as King?
- 2) Whose Kingdom are you building?
- 3) Are you willing to follow Christ's call?