

Matthew 2: 1-17  
Darkness and Light.

Its very hard to speak about the gospel passage from Matthew 2 without images of the three kings intruding.

We have all seen nativity plays, cards, pictures which colour our expectations, of kids in dressing gowns with a tea towel on their heads, bringing our gifts to the baby Jesus.

What can I give him, poor as I am if I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb...give my heart.

Three kings, giving what they have... what can we bring to Jesus.

but there is a darker side to this story which we need to consider, all about power and politics.

We celebrate today as Epiphany Sunday, the revelation of Christ to the gentiles, God's light revealed.

**Isaiah 60** Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

This is a time of Joy and gladness that the Messiah has come.

A time when the mighty will be toppled and the poor lifted up.

God's Good news to the poor.

Not so good news if you are one of the mighty who get toppled. The political and the religious leaders met news of Jesus birth with resistance and not rejoicing.

King Herod, is in charge in Jerusalem. He is a king put in place by the oppressive Roman rulers, and he is a ruthless tyrant, determined to hang on to power at all cost. He is sort of Jewish, a convert whose Judaism seems too politically expedient to be more than skin deep. According to the Jewish historian Josephus Herod followed Jewish law and customs when it suited him, and Roman customs when they were better. He was notorious for murdering

opponents, even his own wife and sons. Emperor Augustus is recorded as saying He would rather be Herod's pig than his son (since as a Jew Herod wouldn't go near a pig, whereas he killed at least two of his own sons).

Herod was a great builder and many of the monuments in Jerusalem were built by Herod the great. 30 years before Jesus was born Herod built a large palace complex, called HERODIUM, really close to Bethlehem..

Following King Herod's death the kingdom was divided between his three sons, and his daughter was given a few cities to rule too. Keeping the power in the family, a common modern political theme.

There seem to be Herod's all over the place in the biblical narrative:

Herod the Great's son was Herod the tetrarch, who had John the Baptist murdered and encountered Jesus at his trial.

Herod Agrippa was his grandson who murdered Jesus friend James and almost murdered Peter, had an angel not rescued him.

His great grandson also called Agrippa encountered St Paul at his trial.

King Herod and the chief priests are so out of step with God's activity that it takes the magi, pagan astrologers, to point out the sign that something is happening. Herod recognizes that if Jesus is Lord he won't be; this baby king is a serious threat to his powerbase, he is very wound up. And so is all of Jerusalem when they hear, because when Herod is frightened everybody will suffer.

Herod immediately calls a cabinet meeting and finds out where this new King is due to be born. Notice that it is Herod who first identifies the baby king as the Messiah, "The King of the Jews" precisely the same phrase appears as the charge which leads to Jesus crucifixion.

Then he secretly calls back the wise men, and asks them for accurate details of what they know about the star. Perhaps it is this detailed cross-examination that first makes the Magi suspicious about Herod's intentions towards the child.

The Magi leave and go on following the star, which leads them to Jesus. Now this is distinctly odd; throughout the Old Testament astrology and magicians are firmly condemned.

Every other time in the bible that the greek word translated "Magi" or "Wise Men" is used it is translated as "Magician" or "Sorcerer".

The Magi are gentiles not Jews, they don't worship the Jewish God- Its likely they were Zoroastrians and worshipped a fire God Ahura Mazda.

Yet here is God leading pagans by means of a star to worship Jesus. Matthew, writing the most Jewish of all the gospels, is telling us that God can and does speak to people just where they are, through the forms they recognize and the spirituality they currently follow.

The Magi pay him homage, the Greek verb describes them lying down flat on the floor before this baby,

Then they bring out their gifts, gifts that you might expect to have been given to Herod as the local king. By giving Jesus these royal gifts the magi are acknowledging that Jesus is King, and Herod Isn't.

The gifts have meaning- Gold for a king, Frankincense for deity and Myrrh perfume used to annoint corpses, echoing his early death. These gifts were also God's provision for Mary and Joseph when they became refugees in Egypt. These gifts, were weight for weight the most valuable things in the Middle East at that time. Gold -pure concentrated buying power, Frankincense and Myrrh were both used as medicines and could be easily sold.

The Magi hear from God in a dream warning them about Herod, and avoid Jerusalem on the return journey, a God-inspired bit of civil disobedience.

Then Joseph has another dream warning that Herod's troops are coming, and the small family flee into Egypt, they lived as refugees in Egypt, Israel's ancient enemy. Leaving their homeland with few possessions the Magi's treasures would perhaps have been sold piecemeal, to ease their journey.

There was a small but thriving expat community of Hebrews in Egypt, testified by many inscriptions, epitaphs and written references, but they were not always welcome.

When Herod realizes the magi have tricked him He is incandescent with rage and orders the soldiers out to kill the boy babies in Bethlehem and neighboring towns. Herod has already killed various family members including a wife and two sons, as well as many opponents. He would think nothing of wiping out the few dozen babies of the right age in and around Bethlehem to get rid of this threat to the established order. Some commentators get worried about the fact that there is no record of the massacre of the innocents in extra-biblical sources, but Bethlehem was a small town, some estimates suggest as few as twenty babies murdered, which wouldn't have made the Roman records.

There are many Herod's in our day, political leaders who care more about their power than about their people, Who put their family in positions of power who sack, kill or imprison their opponents, who have asset stripped their countries economies, or pursue war and ignore offers of peace to cling to power.

There are many innocents in our day, killed by drone strikes, terrorist acts, war, poverty and lack of opportunities. We should not be afraid to speak out against injustice, to act for peace with justice, to be political.

There are many refugees and trafficked people, scared, vulnerable, seeking a better life. Let us remember as we deal with them that Jesus was a displaced person, he lived his early years as a refugee.

There are many Magi in our day... the magi were well-educated spiritual seekers, and God graciously brought them, through the light they could see, to encounter with Jesus. Many around us are looking for ultimate truth and reality, we need to

encourage them that the true light is found in Jesus.

God acts, in the midst of the darkness, political oppression and suffering, God's ways are not our ways. God acts through unlikely people and difficult circumstances The light comes into the world in Jesus.

THERE IS DARKNESS  
But the light shines in the darkness  
And the darkness has not overcome it.

God of Light and Life  
Help us to share your light  
With all we meet,  
Amen.