

## Magi: Crazy happy

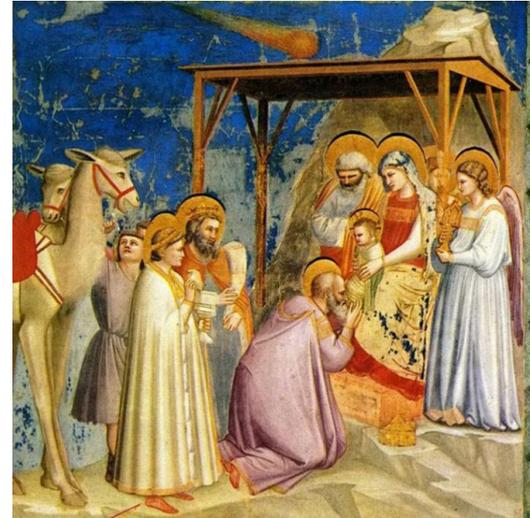
Matthew 2.1-12

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After our Lord Jesus Christ was born, shepherds came to see him, and they adored. That is what Luke writes in his Gospel description. Last week we saw how the angels announced joy to those shepherds. God wants us to enjoy him in 2020.

Matthew does not mention the shepherds. He begins with the story of the Magi - wise men from the East - who came to see the newborn king.

The story of Matthew is interesting. He shows us how people respond very differently to Jesus. There are some good lessons in this story for us.



### 1. Herod

First, the response of King Herod, also known as Herod the Great. He had been appointed 'King of the Jews' in the year 40 before Christ.

King of the Jews. That did not mean King of all people of a certain religion, but king of the Judeans, as he ruled over the area called Judea.

King Herod had heard that some foreigners were asking where the King of the Jews had been born. They had seen a star, and they had come to worship him.

These Magi came to Judea to find the King of the Judeans. And so, guided by a star, they had come to the capital of Judea, Jerusalem.

Herod heard this, and he was troubled. He was worried, disturbed, upset.

Why would he be upset about Jesus?

In the case of Herod, it is predictable. He himself was the King of Judea. Talk about another king naturally made him worried.

He was very unpopular in Israel - for instance because he was himself half Edomite. The Edomites were natural enemies of Judea.



Herod was ruthless: he murdered his wife, three sons, his mother-in-law, brother-in-law, an uncle, and many others.

The days were rife with insurrections, and Herod's fear was always that the Roman occupiers would resort to replacing him as their stooge, their puppet-king, for a more direct Roman dictatorship.

Herod had much to lose. As many people have much to lose when they meet with Jesus.

If you want to hold on to your lifestyle, to power, to your possessions, to living for yourself in the first place, then Jesus is a threat.

Is it not strange, that a child can shake an empire?

Followers of Jesus can shake empires.

The People's Republic of China wants to rewrite the bible, because they are afraid of its impact. The Roman Empire, long ago, demanded that lowly Christians would show their allegiance to the Empire. The Romans were afraid of the impact of the church.

Do you remember how two years ago or so, a few refugees, children from Armenia, were allowed to stay in The Netherlands, after Christians started a continuous church service for their sake?

The government eventually bowed for those prayers.

King Herod, that ruthless powerful ruler, was afraid of a baby. If that baby worries the king, who is the stronger one, really?

If a government has to give in to a church that stands up for refugees, who is the stronger one?

Love for others, for weak people, for children, for refugees, is a strong power, especially if that love is mixed with prayers.

Clearly, king Herod did not have that love. He only loved himself.

"I also want to worship the king of the Jews", He said to the Magi. He gave the impression of being a worshipful 'Christian'.

Gregory the Great, a Cappadocian church father, said in one of his sermons, of Herod:

Herod symbolizes all those today who, falsely seeking after the Lord, never manage to find him.

He wanted to find Jesus, but for very wrong reasons. He wanted no change. He wanted to keep his power, his wealth, his lifestyle.

## 2. The chief priests and the scribes

Next come the chief priests and the scribes. Here we have the religious powers in Judea. They had their Temple and the rich, magnificent culture of liturgy and worship.

Part of the group of chief priests were the high priests of previous years. The high priesthood was confined to just a few families. They were the aristocracy of the land.

And the scribes were the legal theologians in Israel; the experts in knowing how people should live. And they knew their Hebrew Holy Scriptures very well.

They knew it so well, that Herod asked them where the Messiah, would be born.

So Herod called them to his palace in Jerusalem. This was the second most important building in Jerusalem, very large and imposing.

I wonder how the chief priests and scribes met with Herod; to meet with him, a gentile sinner, was unacceptable for these leaders of religion in Israel.

Thanks to Herod they had their freedom to worship as they liked; he allowed them to levy the temple tax. And Herod had spend much money to embellish the Temple.

As religious aristocracy they enjoyed their position thanks to the feeble power-balance in the country, so they made sure to not rock the boat - they supported Herod.

When asked where the Messiah would be born, they knew the answer. Right away. "The Messiah? Bethlehem is where He will be born."

Then why weren't they looking for Him? Doesn't it seem a little unusual that foreign dignitaries had come from the East, claiming to have been led by some star, and looking for one who is called the King of the Jews?

Yet these theological experts could not even bother to walk a few kilometers to Bethlehem to find out whether the Messiah had indeed been born.

They knew the Word of God, yet they did nothing in response. They were too busy with themselves to be concerned about Jesus. In fact, when His public ministry began, they were the principal adversaries of Jesus.

They were looking for a different kind of a Messiah. They were looking for someone who would support their religious system and their chosen way of living, someone who would cater to their whims and conform to their wishes.

A lot of people today want Jesus, but they want Him on their own terms. They want the kind of Jesus who will not challenge them.

These religious leaders were like that. They knew Scripture - they could quote it verbatim. Yet they did nothing to meet the living Savior.



They were in fact not much better than Herod. They were just as worried and upset.. King Herod was troubled, Matthew writes, “and all Jerusalem with him.”

This means, the religious leadership in Jerusalem. “We want a Messiah, but only one that does what we like him to do. A puppet-Jesus. A feel-good Jesus for comfort on a rainy Sunday afternoon.”

As an American bumpersticker of a gun-lover said, “If Jesus Had a Gun, He’d Still Be Alive Today.”

That is the Jesus of the chief priests and the scribes. A God, a Messiah who conforms to our sort of views, and who fits within our style of life.

And often we behave like Herod, and as those chief-priests and scribes. A bit of religion on Sunday, and maybe a bit throughout the week, as long as it does not rock my boat.

As long as it does not challenge my lifestyle, my image, my wealth, my habits, as long as it affirms me as I am.

### 3. Magi

Then come the Magi; the third group in our story. They had come from the East - from Persia most likely.

From secular writings in those days, it seems that there was an expectation in the air that a king would come from Judea, to rule the world.

Maybe this idea had reached Persia as well. The Magi, people used to reading the stars, saw a particular star, and they connected this with the idea that a king was born in Judea.

Matthew shows in the story of the Magi that seekers from all nations recognize Jesus Christ and are welcome in his presence.

And, Matthew shows, that the promise that Israel would be a light for the nations, as the prophets anticipated, is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

All people are welcome to come and worship.

But the Magi had not come with the proper Jewish theology. They had not studied at the feet of St Paul. They did not know much at all about Jesus. But they found Him. They found God.

Maybe they found Jesus because they were not focussed on keeping what they had, but on finding what their hearts hungered for.

Three things stand out for me in what we read about those Magi.

One: They had been prepared to let go of their secure life in Persia. They had travelled from afar, not knowing where they were going. If we want to meet with Jesus, we have to let go of our preconceived ideas, our securities, our clinging to who we are today.

We have to be prepared to let Jesus change our lifestyle, our heart.

This idea is unsettling and uncomfortable, a journey in which we do not know all the landmarks; but we have to keep trusting God who urges us not to turn back or stop.

This is absolutely the opposite lifestyle of Herod or the chief priests. They focused on security, on asserting themselves, on sticking to how things had always been done.

Secondly: The Magi were open-handed. They came with amazing gifts to Jesus. That is the lifestyle of a Christian. A lifestyle of open hands, not tight fists.

Often in sermons we make something of the gold, the myrrh, the frankincense. Gold symbolising a gift worthy for a king, myrrh as a gift signifying the death of Jesus, and frankincense as the gift that pointed at the priesthood of Jesus - for us.

Maybe.

But instead of looking at the symbolic meaning of those gifts, let us at least see that they gave Jesus very expensive donations. They were open handed.

To be a stingy Christian is a contradiction in terms.

I hope that the accountant of our church will this year notice that we are like those Magi, that our generosity will be noticeable in the church accounts. How does your giving pattern reflect your faith?

The third thing I find noticeable in the story of the Magi is how they react when they see the star above the house where Jesus is.

They are crazy happy. Crazy happy.

My translation, the English Standard Version, says: "They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Matthew wants to underline how crazy happy they were.

When they met with Jesus, they let go of all polite inhibitions. They were themselves, without being bothered about what other people would think.

Meeting with Jesus makes us people of joy.

## **Conclusion**

Herod was worried, the priests were troubled. But the Magi were overjoyed.

If you need more trouble in your life, if you like more worries, behave like Herod or those priest and hold on to power; to possessions; to your lifestyle.

If you want 2020 to be a year of joy, of crazy joy, then let go of trying to hold on to where you presently are, to what you have achieved so far, to what you own.

Look the Lord Jesus in the face. Let him open heart to flood it with himself. With love. With peace. With joy. With crazy joy.

**+ Amen**