

Matthew 2:1-12 Paul Simester 5th January 2020

Let me ask you a question. Is it better to be clever - or wise?

King Herod the Great was clever - he was very clever. He was also cruel and calculating. The Romans had appointed Herod as king of the Jews, something guaranteed to put the Jewish backs up as he didn't come from their royal family, and it took three years of fighting for him to secure his kingdom.

He tried to make Jews like him, he even redeveloped their sacred Temple in Jerusalem, but he also set about killing anyone who even looked as though they might try to take the kingship away from him - just in case. Not exactly the best way to make friends and influence people, but clever - get your opponents before they get you. This did make him somewhat paranoid, however, and over a period of time he also ordered the execution of at least two of his wives and three of his sons - just in case.

Enter, wise men from the East. We don't actually know for sure whether they were kings, or how many there were, or exactly where they came from. The Bible calls them 'wise', so we can be pretty sure that they were very well-educated men.

Herod heard that these wise men from the East were in his kingdom. They were asking around; 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' This was serious. HE was king of the Jews, but here were people from outside of his kingdom saying that a new rival had been born. What was worse, this new rival could be from the royal lineage, so could have a better claim to the throne than he had. There could only be one solution, the child would have to die.

So what was the difference between the clever King Herod and the wise men from the East? In one word - Reality. You see, Herod could never accept how things were; he often didn't actually know what was real anyway. Many of the executions which he ordered were of people who might never have been a threat - but he put them to death for his own peace of mind. When he heard that this child was to be king of the Jews he refused to accept it, and set about planning the child's death. He refused to accept that there are three great truths in this world - gravity, taxes and Jesus is King.

By comparison, the wise men not only accepted reality but acted upon it. They knew that this child, Jesus, in a country foreign to theirs, was to be king of that foreign country. They not only accepted this, they actually made a dangerous journey out-of-season in order to bring gifts and worship him. Remember we're talking about a journey lasting many days, probably on the back of a camel, through areas known to be inhabited by lions, bears and wolves.

They went because they recognised something immensely important - that Jesus would be not only king of the Jews, but king of all the nations of the world. The wise accepted reality, the clever tried to change it.

Herod may have been tempted to kill the wise men who were going around his kingdom spreading rumours about a new king. He could also have ordered soldiers to hunt down the child, he had whole armies at his disposal. But no, there was a far better way. Play along with

the wise men, tell them roughly where to look, then ask them politely to come back and tell where this new king was so that he could worship him too. Devious - but clever.

Unfortunately for Herod, the wise men saw the dangers; and after finding Jesus they returned to their own country by a different route. When Herod realised that the wise men had seen through him, he did the only thing he could think to do - he ordered his soldiers to kill every single child in and around Bethlehem. Just imagine that for a moment. A king, backed by the mighty Roman Empire, so scared of a young child that he ordered mass-murder. In fact he was doing what any other king would have done, faced as he was with the problem of hanging on to power by his fingernails. Again, cruel, calculating, but clever.

He failed, as he was bound to do, and died shortly afterwards.

Less than thirty years later Jesus began touring the area, the new king had come to rule the world. But what was it about Jesus that so terrified Herod? What is so different about his style of kingship? What does Jesus have to offer that no-one else can?

Consider for a moment these differences.

- Herod had been appointed king of the Jews by the Romans; Jesus is appointed king of the world by God.
- Herod lived in a royal palace and was doubtless dressed in the latest kingly fashions; Jesus was born in a stable and was laid out in an animal food trough.
- Herod expected his subjects to serve him; Jesus insists on serving his.
- Herod expected his subjects to die for him; Jesus died for his.
- And Herod, infamous for his cruelty, offered only death. Jesus, famous for his compassion, offers life.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany means to reveal – to make known.

Perhaps today is going to be the day when Jesus is revealed to you – perhaps for the first time, or perhaps refreshed after many years.

The wise men wanted, perhaps needed, to find the king. For them, the desire to find him was stronger than their desire to stay in their own country, stronger than the desire to stay with their families. It was strong enough for them to make a long, dangerous journey both to and from Bethlehem – all in search of the king.

And God rewarded their search and commitment by bringing them to Jesus.

The question for you today is this; do you know where the King is?

He's not in a manger in Bethlehem, He's not in a foreign land separated from you by 3,000 miles and 2,000 years.

You may have travelled for many years in search of him. Maybe even those of you who profess to know him aren't really sure in your heart if you've found him.

Let me tell you all; he's here, now, if you want him.

When the wise men found Jesus, they worshipped him, but then they returned home – back to where they'd come from, but perhaps somehow changed.

When we find Jesus, we don't go back to where we came from. Our lives, too, will have changed; but in reality for us there will be no going back. Because, once we know the truth, we can never go back to who we were.

And as we come together to worship this morning, to be church, to be the body of Christ, so we face a new year with a lot of uncertainties. But we can face the new year with a lot of certainties, too, if we know the King.

We will know that Jesus will always be with us regardless of how our days turn out. We will know that, no matter what we do, he forgives us so the we can start afresh – we can begin again with new possibilities.

We will know that whenever we need to talk to him, he'll always there to listen. Sometimes we may wonder if he's really listening but, deep down, under all the stuff of the world that we allow to pile up on us, we will know that he's desperately trying to keep the door to our hearts open.

We will know that, whilst life and the world will throw all manner of pain and suffering at us, he will understand because he's suffered so much more.

God's call to find and worship the King is for everyone who will listen. And if you listen this morning you'll find that God is calling you to him just as clearly as if he'd put a bright, shining star in front of you!

And you don't have to travel hundreds of miles through dangerous lands to find him, you don't have to study the stars to find clues. He's right here, right now.

Epiphany Sunday, remembering when Christ was revealed to the world with offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh; reminding us that Christ is waiting for us now to want him as king of our lives.

Let's pray.

Forgive us, Lord Jesus Christ,
when we are struggling with life,
searching for answers in vain,
relying on our own strength
and failing again.

Remind us, Lord Jesus Christ,
that you are the strength
upon whom we can call,
the power to endure,
the answer that we seek,
the one in whose arms
we can safely fall.

Forgive us, Lord Jesus Christ,
when we forget.

Open our eyes to you afresh today.

Amen