**Jesus is born in Bethlehem**

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Micah 5:1-7; Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 2:1-12

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 242, 184, 252, 231, 253, 180

**Series:** Advent (#5)

**Theme:** The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was troublesome to Herod, fulfilling the promise of a shepherd ruler for Israel and drawing Gentile wise men to come and worship the new-born king.

**Proposition:** Worship Jesus, the promised shepherd king who was born in Bethlehem.

**Introduction**

The first people to come to this area hunted moa (large flightless birds), arriving as early as 1000AD. By 1450 the moa as a species had been pursued to extinction. Then the Moa hunters themselves were either killed or enslaved by North Island Māori as they arrived (in what we now know as Canterbury) between 1500 and 1700. On 16th February 1770 Captain James Cook, on his ship the Endeavour first sighted the Canterbury peninsula. Thinking that it was an island, He called it ‘Banks Island’ after the ship’s botanist James Banks. Early in 1848 the Canterbury Association was formed, and it was decided that this settlement would be called Christchurch, after the Oxford University college that John Godley had attended. The first four ship loads of settlers left England in September 1850. Christchurch became a city by royal charter on 31st July 1856.

Christchurch has a long history, but by no means as long as the settlement of Bethlehem on the other side of the world. The first mention of Bethlehem in the Bible is as a place near to where Rachel, one of Jacob’s wives, was buried (Gen 35:19). Bethlehem in Judah was the home of the Levite who became priest to Micah in the book of Judges (17:7-13). Today Bethlehem is a centre for tourism and Palestinian culture with a population of about 25,000 people. Bethlehem has existed as a settlement by that name for over 3,700 years – much longer than 166 years for this city!

The great significance of Bethlehem for the gospel of Jesus Christ begins when a man from this town left his home, together with his wife and two sons and stayed in the country of Moab (Ruth 1:1). Ironically he departed from Bethlehem (which means in Hebrew ‘house of bread’) because there was a famine in the land. Later this man, who was called Elimelech, died and his wife Naomi was left with her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, who both married non-Israelite women from Moab, but then both subsequently died. When Naomi heard that *‘the Lord had visited his people and given them food’* (Ruth 1:6) she returned to Bethlehem with her faithful daughter-in-law Ruth who committed herself to remain loyal to Naomi, her people and her God (Ruth 1:17).

Later, as the book of Ruth records, a descendant of Abraham, called Boaz, redeemed Elimelech’s land and married Ruth. As gospel writer Matthew records in his opening genealogy, Boaz and Ruth had a son called Obed, who had a son called Jesse, who had a son called David. It was in the town of his birth that David was anointed by the Lord’s prophet Samuel to be King of Israel (1 Sam 16:13). The history of a place can be highly significant, as it is with Bethlehem, the birthplace, not only of David, but also of Jesus Christ. As we focus on the birth of the Saviour this morning from our text in Matthew 2:1-11, we’ll do so under three points:

1. The troubled king
2. The shepherd king
3. The worshipped king
4. **The troubled king**

Matthew doesn’t actually record the birth of Jesus, just writing ‘*now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea*’ (Matt 2:1). He doesn’t explain why the birth of Jesus did **not** take place in Nazareth, the hometown of Joseph and Mary, but Luke does. The Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus had decreed a census for his whole empire. We have a national census here in New Zealand every five years and the data collected helps with planning for services like health, education, housing and transport. Forms are sent out to be completed and returned to be collated.

Things were a bit different 2,000 years ago. Everyone was required to travel to their ancestral homes for census registration because that is where genealogical records verifying who a person was were kept. Remember that there were no ID cards, passports or population databases back then. It would have been hugely disruptive for people’s lives during a Roman census because transportation, despite the good quality Roman roads, was slow. Why bother with a Census? Primarily so that Caesar could tax everyone. It was mainly about what we call today “Inland Revenue”.

So it was that Joseph, being a descendant of David (Matt 1:16) travelled with Mary from their hometown of Nazareth to Bethlehem. It has been estimated that this journey would have taken at least a week on foot, perhaps a little quicker if they rode on donkeys. Matthew’s focus is not on Joseph and his betrothed’s journey to Bethlehem, nor on how difficult it likely was for the very pregnant Mary, but on others who also travelled after Jesus was born. ‘*Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem*’ (Matt 1:1) looking for the boy who had been born ‘king of the Jews’.

These ‘wise men’ or ‘Magi’ were not kings themselves, but priests or court advisers, likely from amongst the Medes and Persians. We would probably call the Magi ‘astrologers’ today because, as a group, it seems that they studied the stars and planets and their supposed influence on human events. The fact that they came first to Jerusalem makes sense because that was the place from where, following David, Israel’s kings had ruled. We don’t know exactly when Jesus was born, or when these Magi arrived in Jerusalem, but we do know that these events took place ‘*in the days of Herod the king*’ (2:1). It has been estimated that Herod was about 69 years old when the Magi came to Jerusalem. He died in 4BC. Jesus was therefore likely born in about 5 or 6 BC – not 0 BC in our (Gregorian) calendars.

There are actually six different individuals with the name ‘Herod’ in the New Testament and they are all related to one another (Herod the Great, Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip the Tetrarch, Herod Agrippa I, and Herod Agrippa II). Herod the Great was not of Jewish descent himself, but an Edomite. He had been nominated by the Roman Senate to be the king of Judea. He was given an army to subdue the kingdom of Israel which he did with capability, craftiness and cruelty. In AD37 The Emperor Augustus increased Herod’s kingdom to include the border regions of what we now know as Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Herod was not called ‘the great’ because of his good rule or virtuous character, but because he oversaw the construction of large buildings in Jerusalem: a theatre, an amphitheatre, a hippodrome, a large palace for himself and a greatly enlarged temple.

Matthew record that when Herod heard that the visiting Magi were looking for ‘*he who has been born king of the Jews*’ (Matt 2:2) he was ‘troubled’. The underlying Greek word here literally means ‘*to shake back and forth*’. It conveys the idea of being agitated, inwardly disturbed, unsettled, thrown into confusion, of being fearful. It is the same word used of the terrified disciples caught in a great storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matt 14:26). It is clear from his later murderous actions that Herod felt very threatened by the birth of Jesus.

Matthew doesn’t explain why ‘all Jerusalem’ were also troubled. Quite possibly they were fearful of how the ruthless Herod would react to the news of a royal child born to be the rightful king of Israel. They certainly had every reason to be troubled by this. Whilst Herod, a Gentile, may not have been overly familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures, he did make the connection between the promised Messiah (or anointed One, the Christ) who would delivery His people and the One born king of the Jews. Over his brutal rule, Herod had often demonstrated his ability and willingness to take swift, pre-emptive action to secure and maintain his power. With this in mind, he assembled ‘*all the chief priests and scribes of the people and he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born*’ (v4). They knew the answer, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The shepherd king**

I can only imagine the relief the chief priests and scribes felt when they could clearly answer king Herod’s question. Knowing the Old Testament well, they would remember that Nebuchadnezzar had become ‘*angry and very furious*’ when all the wise men of Babylon could **not** tell him both what he had dreamed and what the interpretation was (Dan 2:1-12). Being an adviser to a powerful, unpredictable and violent king was a dangerous occupation. Matthew records that ‘*They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "' And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”’* (Matt 2:5-6).

The background to this reference back to Micah 5:2 is a dark time in Old Testament Israel’s history when Jerusalem was being besieged by the ferocious Assyrians under their ruler Sennacherib. Micah prophesies the coming fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians who will ‘*strike the judge of Israel on the cheek*’ (5:1). God’s people would be painfully defeated by their enemies. Yet, from the most unlikely of places, help would come. Not from within the fortified walls of a city, but from the small town of Bethlehem. A ruler would come who was from the birthplace of David, from whose line, God had promised a king who would reign forever (2 Sam 7:12-17).

In contrast to the many self-serving rulers who had oppressed God’s people, this king would ‘*come forth for me*’ (Micah 5:3). He would be ‘*from of old, from ancient days*’ (v2). He would ‘*stand and* ***shepherd*** *his flock in the strength of the Lord in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God*’ (v4). This shepherd king would love, provide for, and protect His people, ruling them under the authority of God. He would be the ruler everybody needs, but no one has ever found in anyone apart from Jesus.

When we look at the wider world today, we see many governments who do not treat their citizens with true kindness and care for them. In a number of countries, the greatest threat people face is not from foreign nations, but from their own despotic rulers. Even in places where leaders are more caring, they lack the strength, resources, and wisdom to fully provide for and protect their citizens. Enemy occupied Israel, under wicked king Herod desperately needed a change of government and so does all of humanity. I do not specifically mean a different political party or a Prime Minister, but a ruler who will truly shepherd his people.

Jesus Christ alone is that King. He is the Good Shepherd who ‘*lays down his life for the sheep*’ (John 10:11). He knows His own and His own know Him (John 10:14). He was born in a small town called Bethlehem and His kingdom starts small. For each person who comes to Him, His kingdom begins in their heart, ruling, providing, protecting and guiding by the Holy Spirit.

The 25th December, Christmas Day, is almost certainly not the actual anniversary of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem. The association of this date with the birth of Christ only began in the third or fourth century. However, as we often think of gifts at Christmas, it is helpful to think of God’s gift of His Son Jesus. God has given His only begotten Son to be the true shepherd king. “*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore*” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Rejoice in Jesus, the servant King born in Bethlehem. Come and yield yourself to Him and He will give you rest (Matt 11:28). He is worthy of your praise, adoration and thanks, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The worshipped king**

The wise men came to Jerusalem with a question and an explanation: “*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*” (Matt 2:2). Was the ‘star’ an actual star like the sun at the centre of our solar system? Or was it the planet Jupiter, often associated with the birth of kings in the ancient world? Or was it the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn forming a sign in the sky? Or was it a comet, like Halley’s comet that was visible in 11BC? Or was it an exploding star, a supernova, possibly in the Andromeda galaxy? We do not know because God has not told us.

The ‘star of Bethlehem’ was certainly a visible luminous object low in the sky which served to point the wise men to where Jesus was (2:9). We also do not know how the wise men knew that the appearance of this star indicated the birth of the king of the Jews. It is possible that they had heard about Balaam’s prophesy recorded in Numbers 24:17 – “*I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth*”.

We also do not know how many wise men there were. The idea that there were three, each one bearing a different gift, is mere conjecture. The names ‘Melchior, Balthasar and Caspar’ are mythological, not Scriptural. The image we may have in mind of the new-born baby Jesus, lying in an animal feeding trough in a stable with the shepherds and wise men gathered round does not match Biblical revelation. Luke records that the shepherds came the same night that Jesus was born (Luke 2:8,15). 40 days after His birth, Mary and Joseph gave an offering prescribed in the law of Moses for the poor (Luke 2:22-24) – a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons (Lev 12:6-8). It seems very unlikely that they were in possession of the high valued gifts from the wise men at the time when they presented Jesus at the Temple.

When the wise men arrived, Matthew records that they went ‘*into the house*’ (Matt 2:11). Joseph and Mary were no longer staying in an animal shelter. Perhaps they were lodging with relatives in Joseph’s ancestral town now that all the people who had travelled to Bethlehem for the census had gone back home? There are lots of details that Matthew does not record. His focus is on the fact that the wise men from the east came to worship the new-born king Jesus.

Matthew records that “*When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh*” (Matt 2:10-11). The language used here to describe their feelings is very strong. The Scripture doesn’t say that they couldn’t stop smiling and that they were ecstatically jumping up and down in their jubilation, but if they were that would fit with the words Matthew uses to describe their superabundant happiness at finding the recently born baby Jesus. Their arrival fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies which speak of Gentiles bringing their wealth to Israel’s king (Ps 72:10; Isa 60:6).

At different times over the years, as a family, we have set a ‘cap’ on the value of presents we give to each other at Christmas so that lavish present-giving doesn’t become a financial burden for everyone. It is very clear that the gifts the wise men brought were highly valuable: gold is a relatively rare precious metal, frankincense a costly ingredient which was used for making perfume and myrrh, an aromatic resin used in anointing oil (Ex 30:23), applied as a perfume (Est 2:12) and also used to embalm bodies (John 19:39). Notice also the posture of the joyfully worshipping wise men – they fell down (v11). They humbled themselves before a baby and offered him great gifts to honour Him. The song by David Phelps “fall on your knees” captures something of this reverence for Christ Jesus. “*Fall on your knees, hear the angel voices. This is the night when Christ was born*”.

Today let us bring to Jesus the most precious gift of worship that we can bring: ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Rom 12:1). Jesus is worthy of all praise and adoration because He is the good shepherd king who became a human being so that He could serve His people by laying down His life for them. That is His gift to all who will receive Him as Saviour and Lord. Worship the King for He was slain and by His blood He has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and He has made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth (from Rev 5:9-10).

AMEN.