

Christ the King

Matthew 2:1-8, 16-23

At Christmas time we sing that Jesus was “born a child, and yet a king”. This fact affected everything for Jesus and His parents right from the beginning.

NOTES:

A Rival King

Matthew begins his gospel saying Jesus is the son of David (1:1), that is, the son of the premier king of the Bible. He traces Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham, tells of Mary’s conception by the Holy Spirit and near divorce from Joseph, and then in chapter two begins the story of what happens when people learn about the arrival of this new king. We know from Luke there were some relatives, shepherds, and faith-filled people who celebrated the arrival of Christ, but a public announcement only happens when wise men from the East come to Jerusalem asking, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him” (2:2). We don’t know how many people were in this party, but we know by their arrival and desire to worship that Herod *the king* is troubled, and all Jerusalem with him (v3). Herod summons the chief priests and scribes to learn that the new king is a credible and prophesied threat who will come from Bethlehem, so he secretly calls the wise men to bring back word of the child’s location under the pretense of wanting to worship Him also (vv4-8). His plot to murder is thwarted when they are divinely warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and Joseph has his own dream telling him to flee to Egypt (vv12-13). When Herod realizes he has been deceived, he commands the murder of all boys two years old and under in and around Bethlehem (v16). Once Herod is dead, Joseph, Mary and Jesus return to Israel, but even then Herod’s son Archelaus causes them to move to Nazareth in Galilee (vv19-23). Scripture doesn’t include this story as an example of an irrationally paranoid and homicidal king. Jesus really did pose a threat to Herod’s rule, but not the way anyone expected.

A New Way of Being King

Matthew describes Jesus as a king from birth, but this is not the first time He enjoyed royal power: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (Jn. 1:1-3). The Son has always been omnipotent. What did He do with His power before the creation of the world? “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). He loved. He served. He is honored and glorified. In our triune God there is all power and all love because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always existed in community. A unitarian loner god has no one to love and can therefore only be an expression of raw power. Love is foreign to him by definition since he is one and not many. A pantheon of gods has no unity, only ultimate rivals. The goal is supremacy via competition. Philosophically and theologically this is the one or the many, unitarian monotheism or pantheistic polytheism, politically expressed as authoritarian dictatorships or warring tribal pluralistic factions. God is the one and the many, power and love together, and so He was never alone nor jockeying for power for power: “Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:26-28). We still speak of magistrates as “civil servants”, which is a legacy of the

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gospel. Jesus came as a king, really as *the* King, and He served His people unto death in order to give us eternal life. This is what the gospels are all about. Jesus' life, not just His death, shows us what it's like to have true royal power. There were some good kings in the Old Testament, but they died or were corrupted with their kingdoms after them. Jesus never desired to be a political ruler on earth, and refused the opportunity when it was presented (e.g. Jn. 6:15). But He acknowledged His office: "Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." (Jn. 18:37).

So What?

Once we see the obvious political ramifications of the birth and life of Christ, it can still be confusing about what difference it makes today. What difference does Jesus make two millennia later? It's hard for fish like us to know the water we swim in, the difference Jesus has made for centuries. After rejecting Christianity, historian Tom Holland came to realize how much it shapes him:

"The longer I spent immersed in the study of classical antiquity, the more alien and unsettling I came to find it. The values of Leonidas, whose people had practised a peculiarly murderous form of eugenics, and trained their young to kill uppity *Untermenschen* by night, were nothing that I recognised as my own; nor were those of Caesar, who was reported to have killed a million Gauls and enslaved a million more. It was not just the extremes of callousness that I came to find shocking, but the lack of a sense that the poor or the weak might have any intrinsic value. As such, the founding conviction of the Enlightenment – that it owed nothing to the faith into which most of its greatest figures had been born – increasingly came to seem to me unsustainable.... "We preach Christ crucified," St Paul declared, "unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness." He was right. Nothing could have run more counter to the most profoundly held assumptions of Paul's contemporaries – Jews, or Greeks, or Romans. The notion that a god might have suffered torture and death on a cross was so shocking as to appear repulsive. Familiarity with the biblical narrative of the Crucifixion has dulled our sense of just how completely novel a deity Christ was. In the ancient world, it was the role of gods who laid claim to ruling the universe to uphold its order by inflicting punishment – not to suffer it themselves. Today, even as belief in God fades across the West, the countries that were once collectively known as Christendom continue to bear the stamp of the two-millennia-old revolution that Christianity represents. It is the principal reason why, by and large, most of us who live in post-Christian societies still take for granted that it is nobler to suffer than to inflict suffering. It is why we generally assume that every human life is of equal value. In my morals and ethics, I have learned to accept that I am not Greek or Roman at all, but thoroughly and proudly Christian.

Jesus didn't become an earthly king of just one nation because He is the King of kings. His kingship means you can't slaughter innocents, or take your neighbor's wife. You don't make Jesus a king, but by hearing His voice, you do become a loyal subject, a beloved child of the King. Adore Him, Christ the Lord, the newborn King.