

Are you looking forward to Christmas?

Matthew 2:1-23

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 24 December 2006

Introduction

It's Christmas tomorrow. Can you believe it? Are you looking forward to Christmas? That was the question a number of Kiwis were asked in the recent *Readers' Digest* survey. The responses were interesting:

- "I feel good about the coming festivities" 55%
- "I feel excited" 38%
- "Christmas makes me feel spiritual" 17%
- "I am unbothered by Christmas" 31%
- "I feel apprehensive" 10%
- "Christmas makes me feel lonely" 3%

The coming of Christmas each year produces very different reactions. This morning we're going to look at Matthew's account of the first Christmas and the strikingly different reactions it provoked. Let's read Matthew 2:1-15.

1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi [or "wise men"] from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east [or, literally, we saw his star when it arose] and have come to worship him."

3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ [or Messiah] was to be born. 5"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written [this is what Micah predicted seven centuries back]:

6" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

7Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold [a gift fit for a king] and of incense [frankincense used by priests in the temple to reconcile people with God] and of myrrh [the bitter herb used to bury dead people. So in those three gifts we see who Jesus is, what he came to do, and what it would cost him.] 12And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

13When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." 14So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

The worship of the magi

So do you see that Matthew is telling us that, as with Christmas today, the first Christmas also provoked some very different reactions.

On the one hand there were those who welcomed and worshipped the newborn king – the wise men or the magi. Now we get the words "magic" from this term. These were magicians, astrologers, practitioners of the occult. These were engaged in practices that were forbidden among the Jews. They probably came from what is now Iraq, traveling hundreds of kilometers across inhospitable desert to find and worship this newborn king of the Jews. Why? Well, it was commonly believed among the gentile world that the birth of great men was heralded by the appearance of a star or some such heavenly phenomenon. And these men may saw such a star. Or at least they think they did. There's been a great deal of debate over what these magi actually saw. One suggestion is that it was a supernova, an exploding star. Others have suggested it was Halley's Comet, which was seen and recorded in 11BC. But the most likely suggestion is that it was actually a conjunction of two planets. Three times in the year 7BC – around the time Jesus was born – Jupiter and Saturn came into line with each other in the constellation of Pisces.

Now this is interesting. Pisces was believed by astrologers to mark the end of the sun's old course and the beginning of the new. Jupiter was the royal planet. And Saturn had long been a symbol of Israel. So, the conjunction of these planets, giving the impression of a new star, would have meant to any competent astrologer that a new age was beginning in which the world would be ruled by a king from Israel. In fact, the Roman historian Tacitus actually says that, "There was a powerful persuasion that at this very time the east was to grow powerful and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire universal empire" (*Histories*, 5.13). So it's not at all surprising that these magi – these pagan astrologers from Persia – would undertake the long and dangerous journey to Judea in search of this new-born baby.

What is surprising is that God would choose to reveal the birth of his Son in this way to these men. What is surprising is that pagan magicians, practitioners of the occult, would be some of the first to worship Jesus. But then maybe that's half of the message Matthew is trying to convey. God often works in surprising ways. God is often speaking to people about Jesus in ways we'd never expect. There are countless stories to substantiate this. Some of you will have heard of Don Richardson. He was the cross-cultural missionary who wrote a well-known book called *Peace Child*. Years later he wrote a less well-known book entitled, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. In it he tells about the Karen people in Burma. They had a legend that one day a teacher of truth would arrive with a black object under his arm. When the first missionary arrived with a black Bible, the Karens listened with intense interest – and hundreds of thousands became followers of Jesus as a result. It seems that generations before the arrival of the first Christian missionaries, God was speaking to them, drawing them to Jesus.

China has one of the oldest languages in the world, and yet there appear to be hints of the Bible – God's word – sown into the written script. Let me give you just a couple of examples of this.

- Researchers have looked at the word "create." It's made up of characters that mean *dust*, *mouth* and *movement* or *life*. They thought immediately of Genesis: "The Lord God formed man from the *dust* of the ground and breathed (with his *mouth*) into his nostrils the breath of *life*."
- The Chinese characters for the word "boat" are made up from a number of other characters meaning *vessel*, *person* and *eight*. Noah's ark, the first great *boat* or *vessel*, had how many *people*? *Eight*. I don't speak Chinese. But there are Chinese people who are stunned by all this. It seems like God was preparing them through their ancient written language to receive in due time his fuller revelation in the Bible.

One more example. Every year Muslims spend the month of Ramadan fasting and praying. I've been told it's not uncommon during that time for Muslims to have dreams in which Jesus appears to them and says, "I am the only way to Allah." I wonder if those magi from the east were representatives of all those to whom God is already speaking. I wonder if Matthew in this story is encouraging us to not only expect God to keep his promises and to be working steadily and continuously in our lives, but also to expect that God is at work in the lives of those around us. To expect that God is and has been speaking in surprising ways to those who we'd think are far from Jesus. To expect that maybe even one of your friends, one of your family, could end up kneeling before Jesus in worship this Christmas, this coming year – just like the magi.

The wrath of the king

But on that first Christmas not everyone fell on their knees in worship. Verse 3 says that "when King Herod heard [about a baby born to be king of the Jews] he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." To understand why Herod was so upset about this news, we need to understand something of the political context to this story. Herod the Great was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40BC. In many ways his reign was enormously successful. He transformed Judea. He built temples, stadiums, palaces, cities. But all this development cost a lot of money. So Herod taxed his people, heavily. Some historians estimate that at the time of Jesus' birth the Jews were living under an 80-90% tax rate. They could hardly feed their families. They were losing their land to debt. Not surprisingly, they hated Herod, and longed for a Messiah who would overthrow Herod. That explains why Herod and his court is so disturbed by news that this baby has been born. If word of a Messiah got out, there could be an uprising. So what does Herod do? What happens?

16When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children

and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

Now we have no independent record of this particular atrocity, and some people have wondered whether it really happened. Was Jesus' life really endangered here? Was Herod really bestial enough to have ordered a massacre like this? The short answer is "Yes." Herod could be a monster. When he won control of Judea, for example, he slaughtered every remaining member of the Hasmonean dynasty that had ruled before him. When he had a dispute with the Jewish religious establishment, he executed more than half the Sanhedrin. When he became suspicious of his own family, he had his wife killed, along with his mother-in-law, and three of his sons. And when Herod was about to die, he gave orders that all the leading citizens of Jerusalem were to be assembled in the hippodrome and killed as soon as his own death was announced – just to make sure that people would mourn his passing. Herod was ruthless, and he ruthlessly eliminated every potential rival to this throne. Except for this one. Except for this baby. The text says in v 19:

19After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

21So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, 23and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

So Matthew stresses that nothing in this story happened by accident. Just like Pharaoh before him, Herod tried to kill God's special instrument to save his people. But God was in control, protecting this little baby, accomplishing his good purposes for Israel and the world.

I recently read an incredible story that demonstrates in much the same way God's providential care for his people. Around 1608—more than a decade before the first Christian Pilgrims arrived in America—a group of English traders sailed to what is today Plymouth, Massachusetts. When the trusting Wampanoag Indians came out to trade, the traders took them prisoner, transported them to Spain, and sold them into slavery. It was an unimaginable horror. But God had an amazing plan for one of the captured Indians—a boy named Squanto. Squanto was bought by a well-meaning Spanish monk, who treated him kindly and taught him the Christian faith. Squanto eventually made his way to England and worked in the stables of a man named John Slaney. Slaney sympathized with Squanto's desire to return home, and he promised to put the Indian on the first vessel bound for America. It wasn't until 1618—ten years after Squanto was first kidnapped—that a ship was found. Finally, after a decade of exile and heartbreak, Squanto was on his way home. But when he arrived in Massachusetts, more heartbreak awaited him. An epidemic had wiped out Squanto's entire village. You can only imagine what must have gone through Squanto's mind: Why did God allow me to return home, against all odds, only to find all my loved ones dead? A year later, the answer came. A shipload of English families arrived and settled on the very land once occupied by Squanto's people. Squanto went to meet them, greeting the startled Pilgrims in English. According to the diary of the Pilgrim Governor, William Bradford, this is what happened: "[Squanto] became," he says, "a special instrument sent of God for [our] good ... He showed [us] how to plant [our] corn, where to take fish and to procure other commodities ... and was also [our] pilot to bring [us] to unknown places for [our] profit, and never left [us] till he died."

Conclusion

God was in control. That's Matthew's message here. It would have been enormously encouraging to Matthew's first readers. They were starting to feel the pressure of persecution and resistance, and Matthew is saying, "Whatever opposition or difficulties you face, God in his providence will protect you." I find that enormously encouraging, because sometimes it seems to me that the church in New Zealand stands no show against the forces of consumerism and secularism in our society today. And sometimes in the past few months, if I'm honest, I've worried about this church and its future. It feels so small and frail, like that little baby born in Bethlehem. And I guess as the year has come to an end, I've worried and wondered about my future. You may be worried about yours. But the truth is, just as God had his hand on Jesus, he has his hand on us. And so the appropriate response as we come to Christmas is with the magi on our knees in worship.