

MATTHEW 2:1-12  
ROYAL VISIT

Meeting royalty is one of these moments in life! Even the most hardened republican is affected! Beforehand, you're told what to expect and what will happen, but nothing quite prepares you for it! You're nervous at the thought; you don't want to trip up or fall over or embarrass yourself in other ways, but the tongue does tend to run out of control a bit; you're trying too hard to make a good impression! No matter how hard you try to persuade yourself that these are just normal people like you, somehow the brain doesn't compute that idea! It's not the person that is intimidating, but it is what the person represents; theirs is a high office, worthy of respect; as a culture we recognise that, even if as individuals we have views and opinions that are different. If you want to visit royalty... that has to be well-planned: you can't just roll up to Holyrod Palace when the queen is there, ring the bell and expect to be admitted; equally, if Queen comes to visit, that too is well-planned in advance and the place is painted, the flags are out and the way is prepared; a few minutes later and she's gone!

Matthew 2 is all about royalty. It is the story of a visit to the king and of the king coming to visit us. The visit of the wise men to the child Jesus is full of kingship and being in the presence of royalty; some of that is good, but Herod reminds us that there is a dark side to this story! Given the trappings of the story, the real question is about the kingship of Jesus – what kind of king is He? He's not normal for a king! He doesn't fit the bill for a king! So can we still talk about Him as a king? Kingship goes through this story like Blackpool goes through a stick of rock; it is everywhere; it is part of the very heart of this story, from the star, to the wise men's body language, to the Old Testament promise, to Herod's reaction. Here is the story of a visit to royalty and of a royal visit to us; Jesus is King and how do we react to Jesus as King? That's the question we have to address and consider. Is this a visiting celebrity, or much more than that?

Kingship is the reason for the trip in the first place: it all begins with why the wise men make the journey. *"After Jesus..." (Matthew 2:1f)* When you look closely at the text, the wise men make their journey anything up to two years after Jesus was born, so they are not at the stable; Matthew calls it a "house". But they do come to see the King. The Church has always had an uneasy relationship with astrology, reading the stars for meaning, but these wise men are astrologers, whatever else they may be. They read the stars and in reading the stars they have seen something that makes them curious; there is a strange coming together in the sky, a new star perhaps, or a nova, a collision of two stars that burns brightly for a time; whatever it is it catches their eye and they decide to follow that star to see where it leads; they sense something important has happened and when it leads them to Israel, perhaps the question begins to form in their minds about a king of the Jews. They are looking for a king; and they have come to worship Him, to pay homage to Him; this is the right response to new royalty; it's what you do for a king. More of that later.

The most natural place to go to find a new king is the royal palace; that's exactly where the wise men go, to the king's palace in Jerusalem. You are looking for a king, you expect to find him in a palace. But no! Herod the Great was not a Jew; he ruled in Jerusalem because the Romans had installed him as their puppet king; he was a ruthless man who stopped at nothing to get his way and hold on to power. The story goes on to tell of him ordering the killing of the children in Bethlehem to try to get rid of Jesus; he also murdered members of his family and anyone who got in his way, who was a threat to his hold on power. When the wise men ask their question about the king, fear, suspicion, and jealousy are all aroused in Herod. When he tells the

wise men to come back when find this new king because he wants to worship him too, that will be exposed as a lie! Jesus is a threat to power, a challenge to Herod's power and Herod is not prepared to let that happen; Herod will hold on to power, no matter what he has to do. There is 'kingship' in the place in the story.

Kingship is there in the old prophecy. Herod's advisers get the books out to try to find the answer to the question 'where': "*In Bethlehem...*" (*Matthew 2:5,6*) At that stage and time, Bethlehem seems an unlikely place for a king to be born, but anyone who knew anything about Jewish history, knew two things: first, that 700 years before Micah had prophesied that a king would come out of Bethlehem, a king who would shepherd His people and be their peace; and secondly, that Bethlehem was the place where David was born and so had all kinds of connections with royalty and not just royalty itself, but the greatest ever royalty in Israel. The answer to the question "where?" connects us with kingship all over again. There is no escape!

There is 'kingship' in the body language of the wise men: "*On coming...*" (*Matthew 2:11*) They are on their knees before this child. Outwardly, there are no trappings of kingship, but the wise men see something that is hidden; they see something that others didn't see, that in this ordinary house sits someone born to be a king. They kneel in front of him, and they give Him their gifts, the posture of homage, of worship, even of obedience. Even if they said nothing, their body language, their actions here would tell the world that they think this child is born to be great, born to be a king.

On the outside, the child doesn't look much like royalty, but royalty is all through this story in its detail. Royalty is there when the wise men leave home, the stars have told them about a new king; royalty is there when they visit the royal palace; it is there in Herod's fear and hatred; it is there in the place where Jesus was born; it is there in the wise men's body language, on their knees and giving gifts. They have come to visit a king and pay him homage and worship. That's what this story is all about; Matthew tells the story so that we can grasp something of the significance of Jesus and learn about Jesus the King. On the outside, He is not much to look at, but inside, deep down, He is a king worthy of honour. Herod saw it and didn't like it; he felt threatened by Jesus and tried to be rid of Him, but Jesus didn't play these power games; Jesus came to be a different kind of king and that's what we've now got to work out – what kind of king is Jesus?

At Messy Church last Saturday, we made thrones. It's amazing what you can make out of your recycling box. We started off with used cardboard boxes and plastic bottles and other things and made these four thrones, beautifully set off by the soft toys who then sat on them. We talked about thrones and who sits on a throne and how it feels to sit on a throne – kings, and it feels grand. Then there are servants and armies and lots of other things that kings have to go with the throne on which they sit. But Jesus had no throne; He didn't wear a crown or fancy clothes; He didn't have lots of servants and had no army. By what definition is Jesus a King? Jesus is the king of His people and the throne on which He sits is my life, my heart, your life, your heart. Jesus is King by shaping our lives, by having authority over our lives to shape our lives in His way. Jesus is King when we listen to His word and do what He wants us to do. His kingship is not found on a map, but is found inside us when we are the people He wants us to be.

There is something symbolic in body-language. Wise men were on their knees before Jesus. That says all sorts of things; it says "You are great; we humble ourselves before You; You are worthy of worship, respect, obedience!" Is there something about that in us? We don't often physically kneel in church, but is there a way for us to picture ourselves kneeling before Jesus? Is there a way for us to acknowledge His

greatness, that He is worthy of worship, respect, even obedience? Is that the kind of relationship we have with Jesus? If He is king, perhaps it should be that way! This is not about religion having power over its followers; this is about the personal greatness of Jesus and our being His friends, followers and disciples. Jesus, the King, challenges us: He challenges our ego, our self-interest, our selfishness, our me-centredness, our desire to get our own way, our human instincts. All of these are parts of our character, and they tend to lead us away from Jesus; His kingship challenges us to change and to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be, we are the throne on which Jesus sits. We listen to Jesus; we want to do His will; we give ourselves to serve Him; we worship Him; as it were, we are kneeling before Him, letting Him be King over our lives.

This is what it means to sing about Jesus as King; this is what it means to call Jesus King. Matthew 2 and the visit of the wise men is all about royalty and a visit to the King. We kneel before the King who Himself came to visit us: Christmas is about the start of Jesus' royal visit to the world, a visit that was to last 33 years; it started in Bethlehem, was hidden in Nazareth for 30 years, but for all that time, Jesus, the King of heaven and earth, took on our human nature; the king has come to visit us and take on everything about us, and then later He even took on our sin and died for us. This is King Jesus; the only crown He ever wore was a crown of thorns! Love this king, worship Him heart and soul, serve Him, obey Him. See yourself on your knees before Jesus, ready to serve Him with all your being. The King has come; rejoice and be glad!