

The Threat of Christmas

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[0 : 0 0] Well, for Christmas, I read an article by Celia Walden in Telegraph, and it had a title, The PC Brigade Cancelled Christmas Long Before COVID Did Boris.

And she was writing about the fear that causing offence about the word Christmas, the fear that people have that Christmas might just be too much for people to cope with and too much for people to take.

And her article was really about how Christmas causes offence. And because it causes offence to some people, she was suggesting that it is systematically ruining our festive traditions.

So whether it be in the cancelling of school nativities or the removal of Jesus or mention of Jesus in public life, she was saying that Christmas has been bleeped out of our British culture.

And she was referring in her article to a recent attempt to avert another COVID crisis this Christmas, where the Cabinet Office had vetoed a public safety slogan, which said, don't take COVID home for Christmas.

[1 : 1 0] Don't take COVID home for Christmas. And it was aimed at students before they returned home to their families at Christmas time. But the message never saw the light of day, because in a leaked email, a quite tall official wrote this.

And so he suggested that the popular holidays or festive season instead of the word Christmas.

And Walden uses this simply as a mere example of the many attempts to cancel Christmas in recent years, which, when you think about it, is a really hard thing to do.

What do you call all those trees that they sell around our cities and towns if they're not Christmas trees? And the holiday season is the Christmas holidays. And yet, when it comes to attempting to cancel Christmas, the kind of cancel culture that we see today that this article refers to that we're aware of, isn't really a recent phenomenon in our nation.

Because you would have picked up from our Bible reading in Matthew chapter 2 that cancel culture actually started a way back in first century Palestine, as King Herod tried to cancel the baby Jesus by effectively killing him.

[2 : 3 5] And yet, the reality is that the coming of Jesus and the claims about Jesus mean that Jesus is actually a threat to us all.

And that's what I'd like us to think about this afternoon for a few moments in this famous Christmas reading from Matthew chapter 2. And I'd like us just to look at two simple things.

First of all, why Jesus is a threat. Why Jesus is a threat. It's because he is king. And then secondly, what we must do. What we must do to this truth that Jesus is king, what we must do is worship him.

So first of all, why Jesus is a threat. He's a threat because he's king. And you can see this in the extreme reaction that King Herod had to Jesus. He sees Jesus as a threat.

And this is despite the fact that Jesus was only, at this point, a very small child. So it's likely these events that were read to us didn't take place at the time of Jesus' birth.

[3 : 40] So this is not the end scene that is so common in Christmas cards. This is, it says in verse 11, a bit later. Because we find that in a house, the wise men are with them in a house.

And remember, Herod's order was to kill boys under two years old. So this isn't necessarily the baby Jesus. This is more the infant Jesus at this stage.

And so we pick this up in verse 1 where we read, So King Herod was ruling on the throne.

He was king. And that's why the wise men showed up. Wise men here are called the Magi. And it's a term that describes scholars, people who were interested in astronomy, dreams, magic, and the like.

And that's why they interpreted the star that they saw in the sky. They saw it as a new Jewish king was born. And whatever the star was, it was positioned there by God.

[4 : 46] And it led them from the east, possibly from the region of ancient Babylon, what we now know today as modern-day Iraq. We don't know for sure where they're from, but we do know the reason for their journey.

Because when they arrive in Jerusalem, this is what they ask. Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

So they want to worship the king of the Jews. So just imagine yourself in Herod's position. You're the king. You're in the palace. You're on the throne. You're waiting to cry.

Then you're probably going to be alarmed when some intellectual elites come from far away, being expensive gifts for a new king.

They're looking for a king, and the king isn't Herod. And so we read, when King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. Seeing that Herod was disturbed is a bit of an understatement, but we see what Herod did in the rest of the chapter.

[5 : 51] But it's Herod's hostility towards the baby Jesus that moves the narrative forward here in this part of the Christmas story. So Herod wants to find out a bit about this so-called king, and that's why he calls in the religious leaders.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. So the chief priests and the teachers of the law, they were the biblical scholars of the day, so they knew the Old Testament scriptures inside and out.

So they had no hesitation in telling Herod the exact place where this king was to be born. It was a no-brainer for them. So they say in Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written, 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 shepherd my people Israel.

Now they're quoting the prophet Micah to say that this ruler, the Messiah, the king, would be born in Bethlehem. Now if you were to look at a map, Bethlehem is only about five miles from where they were, in Jerusalem.

So that's like the distance from Annie's land to Mulgawi or to Mugduk Country Park. So not far. But Herod here, he plays it cool because he fakes an interest in this king.

[7 : 17] So verse 7, we read, then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. Now it's obvious we know that Herod had no interest in worshipping this child.

In fact, Herod was known for being paranoid. He was a tyrannical, cruel ruler. He had no problem in killing people when it suited him. And apparently King Herod even killed his favourite wife when he got a bit fed up of her and what she was doing.

And so when Herod heard of another king, it's no surprise that he began to hatch this evil plan. He didn't want to worship Jesus. He wanted to kill him. And so after the Magi found Jesus, we read, And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said. Take this 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.

[8 : 33] And then later we read, verse 16, When Herod realised 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.

So Jesus was just a small child. And Herod had never met Jesus, but Herod wanted to kill him. He had to be a real Jesus, even if it involved a massacre of all these other children.

And so his savage actions covered a hard heart. But the threat of Christ, of course, didn't just stop with Herod and the Christmas story.

It continued to grow as Jesus exercised his ministry and as he moved towards his death. Because Jesus, the strong reaction he provoked in Herod, is the kind of reaction that Jesus provoked in pretty much all the people he met.

People either loved him or hated him. Nobody was in the middle saying, Oh, he's a nice teacher. Nice bloke to that Jesus. People were either drawn to him, bowing down in worship, or they were repelled by him.

[9 : 49] And so Jesus, about 33 years later, also in Jerusalem, Jesus was called the King of the Jews again. But it wasn't by the wise men who were seeking to worship him in this story. Instead, it was by the Roman soldiers who were mocking Jesus before they crucified him. And they said, Hail the King of the Jews. And then when Jesus was crucified on a cross, above his head on the cross, the governor, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, he ordered the charge against Jesus to be placed above his head.

And it said, This is Jesus, the King of the Jews, written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. And so the title that nearly cost Jesus his life as a small child did actually cost him his life in the end.

And that's why Herod illustrates the threat of Christmas for us. Because the coming of Jesus means that nobody, nobody can be neutral to him.

Because if Jesus came and he claimed to be the one and only King, and proved it by his actions in his life and in his death and his resurrection, then if the true King has come, then we are forced to decide whether he will be my King or not.

[11 : 10] We must either yield to him in submission or try and cancel him from our lives and get rid of him. And so Herod, in his lust for power, he could not tolerate any rivals.

As far as he was concerned, he was the only King, and his kingdom was the only kingdom that mattered. And yet, isn't there just a little bit of Herod in every one of us?

If we look deep inside our hearts, isn't there that kind of resentment that does not want Jesus to be King over me? In our own hearts, in our own lives, we don't really want him to be the sovereign ruler.

And we think, nobody else has got any right to tell me what to do. Even God. I decide what I do. And it fits with the expressive individualism of our modern Western culture, which is captured in the phrase, you have to be true to yourself.

So express your feelings, assert your desires, and throw in your passions, fulfill your dreams, pursue your will. It's really the attitude that says, I'm in charge.

[12 : 23] I call the shots. Which means, we probably don't want God ruling over us anymore than Herod wanted to tolerate Jesus in Jerusalem.

And so we do, as in, claim that Jesus is King. The King who has a rightful authority over our lives. And Jesus proved himself to be King in his life, his death, and his resurrection.

And so because he is the King, the true King, then he summons everybody. He summons us. He calls us to bow before him and give him our loyalty, to give him our allegiance.

And that's why Jesus is perceived to be a threat to our lives. Because if he's the boss, then it isn't me. I'm not the boss.

Because it can't be both. And now, of course, we would never behave as brutally as Herod did here, but we can still attempt to rid our lives of Jesus.

[13 : 26] There can be a deep resistance towards Jesus in our human hearts. Why should he rule over my life? Why should he tell me how to live?

I'll do what I want to do. I'll do what I like when it comes to money, sex, power, work, or whatever. Can you see how we're the ones who actually want to sit on the throne of our lives?

We want to be the ruler. And so we're disturbed when things don't revolve around us. When our felt needs aren't met or our desires aren't fulfilled, we aren't happy.

And so while we might be happy with the notion that Jesus is king, we often feel threatened by the exercise of his rule. And that's exactly what Jesus does.

He claims to be king and he claims to have a right to rule over your life and mine. And so we'll always feel a threat of Christmas until we bow down before him.

[14 : 35] Okay, so that's the first point, why Jesus is a threat, because he is king. Secondly, and finally, what we must do, we must worship him. And that's exactly what the Magi did. They illustrate the other response that we've made to Jesus, the opposite response to Herod.

Because they followed the star until it stopped over the place where Jesus was. And this is what we read. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. Now this is a poor translation.

The ESV Bible captures it much better when it says, when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And the word great there is the word that we get our word mega from.

And so this is mega joy. This is loud. It's intense. Basically, you could impact more joy into a Bible verse than what we've got here. They were so delighted.

Their lives were so changed by what they saw in this baby. But they were never the same again. And so after that, verse 11, on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary.

[15 : 47] And they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So the Magi were overjoyed in their worship of Jesus.

And that is the right response to Jesus. And so then he gave him gifts fit for a king. Because if Jesus is the true king, then he demands our joyful worship and obedience.

He demands all that we can offer to him, all that we can give. Why should we worship him? Or we should worship Jesus because of the kind of king that he is.

Jesus came to get us. And he came at great cost to himself. And Jesus offers us what we need most in life, which is to be saved from our sins.

And it's only possible because Jesus was willing to give up his own life for ours. And we actually see this in the way that Jesus entered into this world.

[16 : 51] So while the Magi, if you think about it, they traveled a long way from the east to get to Jesus to worship him. Whereas, they were only able to seek Jesus.

They were only able to find Jesus because Jesus had already traveled an infinitely greater distance to come down to earth. Paul puts it like this in 2 Corinthians 8, verse 9.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.

Paul's saying that Jesus is the Lord, and he left his riches in heaven to be born on earth. And so Matthew, as he tells the story here, he drops hints of Jesus' identity and of Jesus' mission in coming to earth in these early chapters of his gospel.

And so did you notice how many times in the reading that there's quotations from the Old Testament? And they're all coming from the prophets. The prophets who were promising that the Messiah, the king, would one day come.

[18 : 01] And he'd be the one who would fulfill the hopes for God's people. Because he is God's chosen king who would come to save the world.

But in these Old Testament quotations, what we see is not just that Jesus came, but why and how he came.

Because every aspect of the Christmas story here tells us that Jesus came in weakness, he came in vulnerability, and he came in humility. And so, from the surprising names listed in the genealogy of Jesus, if you flip back to Matthew chapter 1, the shocking names that are included in his lineage, through to the scandal of Jesus being born to an unmarried teenage virgin, through to the death threats on his young life, then on to his family having to flee as a refugee to Egypt.

And then, at the end of reading, he ends up in this place called Nazareth. Nazareth was a small, insignificant town, and yet it became Jesus' home town.

So God's chosen king came from the glory of heaven down to the obscurity of a place called Nazareth, and a great cause.

[19 : 24] Because Jesus was God's chosen king, and yet he was born in a manger, not in a palace. Remember that his life he rode on a donkey, not on a war, worse.

He wore a crown of thorns, not a crown of gold. And he was lifted high on a cross, not on a throne. And so when we consider his identity, everything about him runs counter to what you'd expect.

And so from his risky arrival into the world, all the way to his brutal death, the shadow of death hung over his life.

And yet that is why Jesus came. He came to die. And so while he escaped the murderous death sentence of Herod as a boy, the day would come when the sentence of death would catch up on him.

And so Christmas, Christmas began with a tragic slaughter of all these innocent boys, and yet it ends with a brutal murder of the innocent son of God.

[20 : 31] And so while Jesus experienced the physical pain of death on a cross, he also endured the pain of God's forsakenness as he hung there bearing the punishment for our sin, the punishment we deserve.

And yet the Bible tells us his death was not the end because he rose again from the dead and one day we're told that Jesus will return and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

and so that means that one day all of us, everyone who's ever lived, will be forced to bow before Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and acknowledge that he is the true king.

and so we'll be forced and that's why the wise thing to do is to follow the wise men and bow down and worship Jesus now, to acknowledge him as king of our lives now.

And so as we close, can I ask, have you done that yet? Have you acknowledged that Jesus is your king? He is the true king, but is he your king?

[21 : 48] Look, Herod was physically so near to Jesus and yet he was actually so far away. Whereas the Magi were from so far away and yet they were so near to Jesus.

And so that's good news because no matter how far you may feel you are away from God, either because of how you've lived your life or what you've done, you'll never be so far away from God that he won't welcome you back to himself.

Just like he used the star for the Magi so that you could find him, so he wants you to find Jesus too. And if you seek him, you will find him.

And when you find him, you will be overjoyed with that mega joy that the wise men had. I don't know if you watched the Queen's speech yesterday, we heard from Queen Elizabeth.

But listen to what another Queen said. This is Queen Victoria. And when she ruled, she ruled over a third of the world as the British monarch.

[22 : 56] So that is mega power and authority and rule. But this is what she wrote about Jesus. She said, I cannot wait for him to come so that I can cast my crime before him.

Queen Victoria was so aware that despite her great power, there was another king who deserved her worship. You know, there's a part of our hearts that wants Jesus to be king because we want him to guide us.

We want him to protect us. But there's another part of our hearts that doesn't want Jesus as king, that fears or even resents his authority.

over us. But Jesus is the true king of our hearts desire, whether we realise that now or not. Because he's altogether trustworthy, altogether powerful and loving.

Because he came to give his life for yours and for mine. And so you might be thinking, well, okay, what can I give? What do I do?

[24 : 03] Well, we should give ourselves completely to Jesus. That is how wise men, wise women, wise boys and wise girls respond to him.

Thank you.