

# “Kings and Crooks”

a sermon by

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**Text: “And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11).**

During the Presidency of Richard Nixon (1968-1974), a crisis developed that centered on worship. This was the period of the Viet Nam War and the war had become very unpopular. On several occasions when the President had worshipped in one of the local churches, the minister had used the occasion to condemn the war. The President, obviously embarrassed by this kind of incident, countered with his own proposal. He decided to hold worship services in the East Room of the White House and invite the ministers whom he wished to conduct the services. Obviously, under those circumstances the White House had more control over what the message on any particular Sunday might be.

I remember that it was considered a great honor among ministers to be invited to preach in the White House and there was great deal of pride at stake in terms of who was invited and who was not. In fact, there was a book published that was entitled *Sermons Preached in the White House* and many ministers were eager for people to know that they had been among this select company. But, when President Nixon resigned in 1974 in the wake of the Watergate Scandal, all of a sudden the attitude changed. In a short period of time what had been a badge of honor became a mark of infamy.

## I.

There is something particularly unsavory about the alliance between religion and politics. Most Americans, regardless of their political affiliation, share a certain amount of discomfort when politicians and preachers become too close.

When Matthew relates the story of the birth of Christ, he notes that from the very beginning there was a toxic mix of religion and politics. Whereas Luke's gospel presents the birth of Jesus as being welcomed by the reigning political powers, Matthew takes a very different tact.

For Matthew the stumbling block to the birth of Jesus was Herod the Great, the King of the Jews. Herod was a powerful figure. He oversaw a number of major building projects including the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem that surpassed even what King Solomon had built almost a thousand years before. Herod, however, was a brutal king. He murdered his wife and three of his own sons, and anyone else who got in his way.

At the time the wise men approached Jerusalem, Herod was seventy years old and nearing the end of his reign. But he was intensely jealous of the report of a new king being born that the wise men brought. They had seen a star in the East and they had followed it to Jerusalem and were prepared to follow it to Bethlehem as well.

This is clearly a story about the birth of Christ that is ingrained in our understanding of Christmas.

## II.

But it is also a story that has puzzled many people through the ages. The Gospel of Luke, our only other source about the birth of Jesus, does not mention these Magi or this wondrous star. Luke does not seem to know of the flight into Egypt or of Herod's attempt to kill all the male children of Bethlehem.

Furthermore, a celestial phenomenon of a star of this magnitude would have no doubt caught the attention of many people in that part of the world, and yet there is no other account in ancient history of such a star. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine King Herod having to send out soldiers to find where the child was born. Bethlehem was a small village, only four miles from Jerusalem, and the appearance of such majestic kings would have certainly caught someone's attention.

There are, however, several things that Matthew would like us to know about the one whose birth we celebrate at this Christmas season.

## III.

The first is that the birth of the messiah has significance not only for the Jews but for the gentiles as well. Early on the church recognized the significance of these Magi. No one is exactly sure where they came from. They could have certainly come from Persia or Babylon or from Arabia.

But one thing is sure. They were not Jews. They were gentile kings, who saw a strange star and believed that it signified the birth of some important person. In the church year there is a

season of Epiphany, which ordinarily occurs immediately after Christmas. It marks the coming of the Magi and the revelation of Jesus to the gentile world. The season of Epiphany is the season that is ordinarily associated with the Global Witness of the Church. It signifies that “Great Commission” of Christ to go into the entire world and to proclaim the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

This past week I had the opportunity to visit the Monet exhibit in Raleigh, North Carolina. It is a magnificent exhibit and one that all of us in North Carolina should be very proud of. Monet was one of the most famous of the French Impressionists. There is a certain power in his work that is evident in his fascination with seascapes around the city of Giverny as well as the cathedral at Rouen. That is part of the great power of art. It has the power to lift us from the common place of life to see things in a new perspective.

That is what Matthew does in this narrative of the Magi. Almost from the very beginning of the church there was a fascination with this story. Somehow it cast a different light on the birth of Christ. Whereas the shepherds with their flocks represent something that was very common in Jewish life, these Magi represent something very different. Over the course of the centuries these Magi acquired names: Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. Their gifts also took on a symbolic meaning. Gold represented virtue, incense stood for prayer, and myrrh came to represent the suffering of the Christ.

But let us not forget the great meaning of this beautiful story of Christ. It announces that the Christ who was born in Bethlehem is not only the promised Messiah to the Jews; he is the Savior of the world. He is the one sent to the outcasts of every race, who eats with tax collectors and sinners, and who draws unto himself every race of humankind and every human condition. He heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, and when he teaches he does so “as one who has authority and not as the scribes.”

#### IV.

There is something else. Matthew, in his description of the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25), makes clear to us that the birth of Christ is a revolutionary event. The birth of Jesus is a birth that turns the kingdoms of the world upside down.

Recently, I came across an interview of N.T. Wright in *Christianity Today*. Wright is not only a brilliant New Testament scholar, he is also a churchman. He serves as bishop of Durham in the Church of England. In many ways he reminds me of C.S. Lewis, except that while Lewis sought to take the gospel to the modern world, Wright understands that we are living today in a postmodern society. There is a certain “nihilism” in our world today that was not present a generation ago and Wright understands this.

Wright notes that in recent years there has been a renewed interest in the ancient heresy of “gnosticism”—the notion that salvation comes by means of a special kind of knowledge, which is known only to a privileged few. This has been manifest recently with the best selling book *The DaVinci Code*, but it is also found in the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Mary*

*Magdalene*. The view that is current today is that orthodox Christianity hushed up the really exciting things about Jesus and promoted this boring, sterile picture of Jesus that is in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But as Wright points out, the Christians that were being thrown to the lions, burned at the stake, and sawed in two were not the ones reading the Gospel of Judas or the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. They were the ones reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Let us make no mistake. The birth of Jesus Christ was a revolutionary event.

#### IV.

There is something else that Matthew makes quite clear in this extraordinary story of the Wise Men. This Jesus, who is born in Bethlehem, is the savior of the world. Matthew makes this quite clear in the announcement of the angel to Joseph. “You shall call his name Jesus,” says the angel, “for he shall save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:18-25)

Isn't this what Christmas is all about? In so many ways we have missed the meaning of Christmas, but Matthew does not miss it. He understands the significance of the birth of this child.

The New Testament insists that there is something profoundly amiss in the human condition. Paul Tillich in his book, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, speaks of the real dilemma that all of us face. We are separated from our creator, from one another, and even from ourselves. One only has to look at the world around us to see the terrible evidence of this. There is continued chaos in Iraq and Afghanistan, genocide in Dafur, an epidemic of AIDS in Africa.

There is separation among our own families. Psychologists often speak of the “sadness of Christmas,” a reminder to many of us of the brokenness of human life all about us.

There is separation within ourselves. So often, like the Apostle Paul, we find that the “good we would do, we do not do, and the evil that we would not do, we do” (Romans 7: 13 ff.).

That is the world to which Christ was born. “The people who walked in darkness,” writes the prophet Isaiah, “have seen a great light.”

This is the light we proclaim today. The powers of sin and death, frightening and real as they may be, are not the final word. The final word is “Emmanuel”—God is with us.

The New Testament understands this predicament. It knows the reality of the “principalities and powers.” It begins with the statement, “Even when we were dead through our trespasses.” But then it proclaims a saving power that has been released into the world by Christ, which could redeem individuals and move them over until they were no longer part of the problem, but part of the answer. In that, the New Testament saw the promise of a redeemed humanity. It started with night and then it saw the Star and was glad. As Clement of Alexandria said long ago about Christ: “He has changed sunset into sunrise.”

There is a sense, of course, that Herod got it right. He was afraid when he saw these Magi, afraid that there might be some king that could usurp his power and the power of Rome.

In these terrible days we should not be content with formal religiosity. Saviorhood is the essence of Christ, and to face our deep needs in earnest, to repent sincerely and to seek forgiveness and power, to take seriously him who for our sakes suffered, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God—that would be to experience the real meaning of Christmas.

Amen!