

**Isaiah 35.1-10**  
**Matthew 11.2-11**  
**1<sup>st</sup> January 2023**



## **Two Responses to Christmas**

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*Gracious God, we open the bible and long to receive your word. Open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*

Much of the Christmas story is about our response to the news of Jesus' birth. After Mary is delivered of her son the plot quickly turns into a narrative of reactions. Each prompting us to ask what we make of the coming of God and how we might respond to the idea of God's presence among us.

It's sometimes said that our relationships are defined by the space between us and someone else. How do we fill the space that exists between me and you? We are blessed when someone, maybe a parent or a friend, wants to fill that space with love. But we are wary of a person who might spoil that space between us, filling it instead, with anger or misunderstanding. And, of course, it's never just how others fill the space, it's how we fill it too that counts.

This morning I simply want to reflect on two responses to Christmas and the way Herod and the Wise Men filled that space between them and Jesus and what sort of relationship resulted.

The Wise Men, Kings, Magi – well, whatever we choose to call them, they are something of a mystery to us. 'Outsiders' with perception and 'Seekers after Truth' with perseverance.

Some think they might even have been Zoroastrians. Zoroaster himself believed his was a virgin birth and urged his followers to seek out similar people.

Whatever their origins they are described as open-minded thinkers, willing to encounter new truths and be led by fresh understandings. Theirs is both an outer and an inner journey of faith. They 'move on' and eventually, maybe even after years of travelling, arrive at a destination that is characterised by worship.

Surely there is so much left out of their story because it's quite something for such an epic journey to come to an end at a baby's crib. Was this domestic scene before them the reason they had searched so hard and travelled so long? Well,

yes, it appears it was, because there and then they present their famous gifts. I think for such an epiphany to make any sense there must have been many more conversations, encounters, reflections and even struggles of which we are simply not told in order to bring us to this moment of worship and gift giving.

Across the centuries the Magi encourage us to be open minded as we seek for truth. To be generous in spirit so that we glimpse something so much deeper in Jesus than just his birth. These Wise Men, they filled the space between them and Jesus with wonder and a hope, a sort of mystery that was life giving and affirming, they filled it with worship.

Herod's stance and story couldn't be more different.

He was a Roman Jewish Client King, always looking over his shoulder to see what his masters in Rome made of him. Maybe that way of reigning but nor really ruling made him insecure.

Yet he had been, politically, remarkably successful. He'd navigated his way to the top and used his power to build great infrastructure, like his remodelling and extension of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple. Indeed, when he died his position was taken over by not one but three successors, the kingdom being subdivided amongst his three sons: Archelaus, Antipas and Philip.

Ironically, therefore, Herod the Great, by now in his early 70's, might well have viewed himself as a success. He was a survivor and a builder. So, why does Matthew draw him into the story as someone so threatened by the birth of Jesus?

Matthew has Herod fill that space between palace and stable with insecurity and hatred. This is portrayed as no comfortable space but one in which Herod felt threatened.

And so, Matthew writes a story, maybe an imagined one, in which an earthly king feels so threatened by the birth of God's special One, that he indiscriminately removes all who might one day stand against him. An act that has become known as the Slaughter of the Innocents.

Of course, there's never a Herod in any Nativity Play as no one would want to play him and why bring in the dark side of Christmas?

Yet, maybe Matthew wanted us to read this story not historically but personally. He wants to make a theological point about what a life looks like when we refuse God's way of love and cling on to our way of power. If personal power and influence becomes our sole motivator, then we too might stamp on those who are weaker than us.

So, here we are on day one of a New Year and perhaps no day gleams with more potential and hope than January the first. And the question I ask myself this morning, how will I fill the space between me and God and between me and all those people with whom I have the privilege of spending 2023?

If I'm like Herod, then I'll put myself in that space, I'll want to control all the variables, so I come out on top.

But, maybe if I take my lead from the Magi, I'll leave room in that space for the Holy Spirit, and I'll be willing to be led by God and by the love of others into new experiences that will broaden my mind and help me see the world and others differently.

Of course, these are not binary options. Sometimes our reaction and inclination will reflect more of Herod than of Magi, and that's where the discipline of worship with its time of reflection and confession may helpfully hold us to account week by week and help us reassess our priorities and how we 'fill the space' between ourselves, God and others.

And, in closing, I just want to say the briefest of words about another space before us today: those 365 days that are before us.

That can feel like a very big and even frightening blank canvas.

Well, on this New Year Sunday I like to think that none of the days before us are truly empty. There's already one thing that is marked in to every single one of them – and that's the presence of God who will welcome us to every day of 2023. God is already here, with us now and part of our future too. The God who goes before us, prepares a way for us, and meets us each new day with his love, strength, joy and peace.

I can't think of any better motto for 2023 than the words we read from the Jewish Scriptures this morning, words from Isaiah 63: *I shall recount the Lord's unfailing love.*

May God's unfailing love fill the space, between me and you, and between the first and last days of this New Year.

May it be so, in the name of the one who will walk everyday alongside us. Amen.