



Three Kinds of Kings

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

The story of the coming of the Magi presents us with three strands in the Bible's understanding of kingship. First we have what it means to be ruled over by a benevolent power; then we have what it means to be oppressed by a malevolent ruler; and finally we have a hint of what it means to exercise power yourself. Tonight we're going to look at each of these in turn.

The Foreign King – The Magi: Isaiah 45.1-7

We start with what it means to be ruled over by a benevolent power. When you read the Bible you need to hold two things in tension: being ruled by a foreign power had been the experience of God's people for the majority of its history; yet it still didn't regard that context as normal. The definitive moments in Israel's history, the time of slavery in Egypt and the time of exile in Babylon, were both about being ruled by a foreign power. But within the experience of exile grew an expectation that not all foreign regimes were oppressive, and that God was prepared to work in some cases through Gentile kings.

The key Gentile king was Cyrus, who's described in Isaiah 45 as the Lord's anointed, or Messiah – the same title that's later used for Jesus. Cyrus is the definitive good foreign king. He's the Persian Emperor who sends the children of Israel back from exile in Babylon to resume life in the Promised Land.

When we read that the three kings in the Christmas story came from the East, it's no idle geographical sweep of the hand. The East meant, to Israel, the place from which catastrophic invasions had come, and most of all it meant Babylon, the place of exile, and yet the crucible in which a new relationship with God came about. The prospect of these three kings coming to worship the baby Jesus is a magnificent reversal on many levels: Eastern kings far from destroying Israel were now worshipping Israel's God; Eastern kings far from blaspheming Israel's God were now perceiving that God in human form while much of Israel was failing to do so; Eastern kings, far from dragging Israel across the desert into exile were now themselves humbly crossing the desert to find one who was greater than themselves. This is the completion of a story that begins back in Isaiah 45 with Cyrus.

What this represents is that Jesus is the fulfilment of the strategy Israel adopted in exile. In exile, despite the grief and suffering of its plight, Israel sought the welfare of the city, was faithful and constructive and saw God at work in the stranger and foreigner, praying that one day all would become clear. Now, here in Jesus, in all the marvellous reversals of power and authority and divine presence, that day had come, the exile was finally over, and the benevolence of Cyrus had finally been displaced by the kingdom of God.

Let us pray. God of the exiled and the wilderness-wanderers, give hope and courage to those who live under difficult regimes or work with those they find it hard to love. Hasten the day when your true purpose is revealed and we recognise the reason for all things in the presence of your kingdom, enfleshed in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Oppressor King – Herod: 1 Samuel 8.1-20

The Old Testament isn't all starry-eyed about Israel having its own king. There's certainly a strong narrative that goes through the book of Judges about what a mess Israel was in when there was no central leadership for the twelve tribes and everyone did as right in their own eyes. That narrative sees the choosing of Saul as a huge providential step and the coming of his successor David as the zenith of Israel's glory. But all along there's another counternarrative going on, one that sees Israel's desire to have a king as a lack of trust in God and a sinister urge to be like other nations. This central text of 1 Samuel 8 is like a wailing prophecy that echoes through the centuries that follow. When we read the prophets bewailing the way the rich in Israel oppressed the poor, and bemoaning the injustices of the land, we look back to this warning cry and see how a great many people thought this shift to monarchy was where Israel had gone wrong.

The figure of Herod in the magi story is a pantomime villain of the first order. Don't miss the way he's set up to resemble Pharaoh in the Exodus story. They both get into the business of killing baby boys; and they both fail in their ruthless mission to prevent God's plan of liberation. But a more subtle critique is also going on. Herod is a half-Jewish quisling of the Romans, a puppet king allowed to squawk and strut his way around Jerusalem and pretend to be the inheritor of David and Solomon and the glory days. The story is saying look what Israel has come to – its rulers, far from imitating Moses and bringing freedom and covenant, are instead imitating Pharaoh.

So if the coming of the three kings is saying Israel is still in exile, then the presence of Herod in the story is saying Israel is still in the slavery of Egypt. But there's a delicious irony taking place at Herod's court, which is that the scribes, the expert students of the scriptures, tell the three kings to go to Bethlehem. In other words there's nothing the might of the unrighteous imposter king can do in the face of the simple power of the word of God in the scriptures. Herod can't stop people finding their way to Jesus. Here is an announcement that Jesus is not only bringing Israel out of exile, he's liberating Israel from slavery too. And a slavery that's at least partly of Israel's own making.

Let us pray. Liberating God, visit tonight those who live in the grip of slavery, as subjects of human trafficking or as prisoners within their own home. Bless any who like the holy family have been forced to migrate to escape tyranny and danger. Turn our hearts to your son, that in him we may find hope, healing, and liberation. Amen.

The Servant King – Jesus: Isaiah 49.1-10

The best way to read Isaiah 49 is to imagine it as the words of God the Father on the lips of God the Holy Spirit whispered into the ear of God the Son. Practically every line is a mission statement for messiahship. 'He made my mouth like a sharp sword' anticipates Jesus' role as a prophet and teacher. 'In his quiver he hid me away' foretells Jesus' thirty hidden Nazareth years before his ministry in Galilee begins. The words 'You are my servant,' are fulfilled at Jesus' baptism, and the announcement 'in whom I will be glorified' predicts the language of the Transfiguration. The phrase 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity' is echoed in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus wonders if all has come to nothing. We could go on, but the point is the climax that these phrases are leading up to.

And that climax comes in these signal words, words that epitomise the feast of Epiphany and the message of the story of the three kings. 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.' Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel, indeed. But Jesus is more than that. Jesus is the desire of the nations, the fulfilment of all creation. But don't miss the irony – that this great king who will at the end of this same gospel send the disciples to the ends of the earth is at the moment the three kings see him a very small thing indeed, a tiny baby in Bethlehem.

This is how Jesus will fulfil the title that Pilate places on the cross – The King of the Jews. Not by leading a rebellion to oust the Romans from Palestine, but by showing Israel that its calling was beyond itself, that its vocation was and always had been to be a blessing to the whole world, to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to stand before God interceding as the high priest of all creation. That's what kingship turns out to mean. It's not a possession, as Herod mistook it to be, a means of lining one's pockets, currying favour and enjoying luxury and the public gaze. It's a role that consistently reminds the people of their higher calling, of their greater destiny, of their true vocation. If all Israel wanted a Messiah for, says the story of the three kings, was to throw out the Romans and go back to having its own king, then it might as well settle for having Herod.

No, it is too light a thing, the story tells us, simply to restore the fortunes of Jacob. Jesus has come into our midst as a light to the whole world, to bring transformation and healing and reconciliation between all people with God and one another and the whole creation.

And that's where the challenge lies for us, this Epiphany night. Have we been reading a story that's too light, a gospel that's too limited, a salvation that's too restricted? Listen to the Holy Spirit whisper these words into your ear right now: it is too small a thing ... for I give you as a light to the world. What are you doing that's smaller than God's kingdom? What are you being called to that is opening a light on the whole world?

Let us pray. God of prophecy and fulfilment, in Isaiah you tell us it is too small a thing, and you call us to be a light to the nations. Show us where our gospel and our vocation and our imagination is too small, and lead us into the places where your destiny draws us. In Christ our servant king. Amen.