

A Star Trek

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[0 : 00] As we look at that passage read to us just a little moment or two ago from Matthew chapter 2, those opening 12 verses. Many years when I was growing up, one of my favourite programmes on television was called Star Trek.

I was a big Star Trek fan, Dr. Spock, Captain Kirk, the adventures of the USS Enterprise, exploring strange new worlds, seeking out new life and civilisations, boldly going where no man has gone before.

Now one of the things about Star Trek that kind of sets it apart from many other TV shows of that era, indeed of any era, is the fan phenomenon that it created.

A group of people known as Trekkies. Be a fan is one thing, be a Trekkie is something. You're put in a whole different league.

What do I mean? Well, over the years there have been many examples, striking examples, Dr. Dennis Bourguignon, a dentist in Orlando, Florida, whose surgery had a Star Trek theme.

[1 : 16] His wife Shelley, his entire dental staff, wore Star Trek uniforms while working on their patients. There was a man in 1974 who changed his name to James Tiberius Kirk.

The woman who in 86 turned up for jury duty in the States, wearing a Starfleet uniform, complete with a phaser and tricorder. The people of the town of Vulcan in Alberta, Canada, they constructed a 31-foot replica of the Starship Enterprise at the entrance to their community.

Now there's a thought for Winchborough. And then there was Glenn Pruschell, the founder of the Interstellar Language School, Red Lake Falls, Minnesota.

Now that is an institution that taught students from all around the world how to speak Klingon. Publications included conversational Klingon.

I don't know if you've come across those. Power Klingon. There's even a Klingon dictionary and even a version of the New Testament in Klingon. So being a fan is one thing.

[2 : 24] Being a Trekkie is something completely different. This morning, just for a moment or two, I want to look at a somewhat different Star Trek and a different group of Trekkies.

We find them here in the opening verses, Matthew chapter 2, titled, they're called Magi in some versions. And here in NIV, I think wise men in the ESV who come from the East.

We're told that a star had arisen in the eastern sky, had revealed to these men that a new king had been born in Israel. And the appearance of that star signified for them the beginning of, if you like, their own personal Star Trek.

And these wise men, Magi, are, I think, the most intriguing and enigmatic characters in the Christmas story. They kind of sweep in and then they sweep out.

And I want just to highlight, you know, three things about them from our text this morning. So let's first of all look at the journey they made.

[3 : 35] And we have that in the first two verses, I think, of Matthew chapter 2. The journey they made. So these Magi from the East are somewhat mysterious figures.

We're given very little information about them. And that's perhaps why, over the years, a great deal of tradition and legend has grown up around these unusual characters.

People have often sought to kind of fill in the missing blanks, as it were, with their own suggestions and ideas. And so the Magi of the Christmas story, they've often been assigned a number and names, a variety of other characteristics.

But much of that is conjecture, finds little or no support in the text of Matthew's Gospel. Not told the number of the wise men.

Nowhere in the narrative are we told there were three of them. The number is deduced, really, from the fact of the three gifts. Gold, myrrh, and frankincense. There could have been more, perhaps

even less.

[4 : 57] I think in Eastern Orthodox tradition, there are 12 of them. So quite a big gang. We don't know their names. Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar. These are later traditions created by the church.

They're not part of the biblical story. They were certainly not kings. Magi, wise men. Magi is a word from which we get our word for magic.

These were not conjurers. They're not David Blaine or Paul Daniels or whatever. They were Zoroastrian astrologers. They studied the stars.

They were skilled in reading the heavens, as it were, and in divination. They probably came from Persia. They are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, notably in the Old Testament book of Daniel. You may recall there that they conspire against Daniel, God's servant, in Babylon. And their journey is precipitated by the appearance of the star, indicating the birth of a new king.

[6 : 00] And they set off on a journey. A journey that would have lasted many months. It would have involved them traveling a distance of over a thousand miles. So it's not a kind of idle trek that they undertook.

It was a serious conviction that prompted them to embark on this long and quite arduous journey. They were not present at the birth of Jesus.

The narrative tells us they arrived much later, after Jesus was born. Chapter 2, verse 1. They encountered the family, we're told there, in verse 11, while they were staying at a house.

So the nativity scene with the wise men at the stable, not really based on the text of Scripture. The Magi are not in the story, as it were, to draw attention to themselves.

As I say, the information we have about them is scant. But they're here because their attention has been drawn towards the person of Jesus Christ. The purpose in the narrative here is that they're seeking this new king.

[7 : 09] They want to bring him homage and worship. And as such, these pagan, Gentile astrologers serve as a foil or as a contrast with the religious leaders and insiders in Jerusalem.

The Magi are outsiders, and yet they are drawn in to worship this new king. The chief priests, the scribes, the biblical scholars in Jerusalem, those who have the Scriptures, they seem completely in the dark.

And the Magi are the first people in Matthew's Gospel who come to worship Jesus. And their journey here at the beginning of the Gospel is a reminder to us that this new king will be a blessing to the nations.

Isaiah prophesied that the Gentiles would come and worship the Messiah. Nations, Isaiah 63, Nations will come to your light, kings will come to your dawn.

The psalmist talking about the Messiah, Psalm 72 verse 10, Kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. And it's an interesting aspect of Matthew's Gospel, which is probably the most self-consciously Jewish of all the Gospels, is the way that it portrays the kingship of Jesus.

[8 : 35] There's nothing narrow, there's nothing parochial in Matthew's understanding of the reign of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. Jesus is not simply king of the Jews.

He's king of the whole world. And the journey of the Magi is a sign that the kingdom of Jesus Christ is for the whole world. Jesus the king will reach out to draw to himself men and women from every tribe, nation, people, and language.

And so Matthew's Gospel begins with Gentiles coming to worship Jesus. And you may recall, you may remember how he ends his Gospel.

Matthew chapter 28, verse 18 and following, Jesus came and said to them as disciples, All authority on heaven and earth is given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and I will be with you always to the very end of the age.

[9 : 45] Matthew's Gospel closes with Jesus sending his church, his disciples out into the world, so that all nations and all peoples might come and worship him.

He has come as the Savior of the world. He is a king who is for all. He reaches out to all peoples, all different kinds of people, all kinds of people in this community.

These pagan astrologers, the Magi, who come to worship Jesus at his birth, are actually the first fruits of the amazing mission of Jesus to the whole world.

The journey they took. The journey they made. That brings me to the second thing here. Let me just, there's no clock in here, so I better be careful.

The trouble they caused. The journey they took. Secondly, the trouble they caused. We have that verses 3 through 8. And looking for a king of the Jews, understandably, they head for the Jewish capital, Jerusalem.

[10:54] They think that he's going to be found there. They arrive in Jerusalem, maybe with a fanfare, we don't know, but they start to inquire, to ask questions about the one born king of the Jews.

And their presence in the city and the news of their quest comes to the attention of King Herod. But this visit of the Magi with this news of a new king being born in the region was not welcomed by Herod.

We're told in verse 3, when Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Now this Herod, he was known as Herod the Great.

He was a ruler. Very significant, very powerful individual. History tells us that he undertook many significant building projects, a huge scheme of redevelopment, expansion of the Temple Mount. But although he was known for many great works, like many ancient rulers, he was a paranoid and deeply insecure man.

[12:08] He brooked no rival to his kingdom. And history reveals that Herod was perhaps more paranoid than most. He had numerous officials summarily executed for any appearance of disloyalty.

He arranged the murder of three of his brothers-in-law, one wife, and a mother-in-law. So, not exactly the milk of human kindness. He also had a number of his own sons put to death because he suspected they were plotting against him.

He was said to have a huge bodyguard. Many, many soldiers. He was a brutal tyrant. He was an oppressor of the people.

He was jealous of his own status, his own position, his own authority. And so, this news brought by the magi of a new king raised the prospect of a rival to his throne.

And you could see that Jerusalem was greatly troubled at this news because when Herod was troubled, you can be sure that everyone else was troubled as well. We're told in verse 4, assembling all the chief priests, the scribes, the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

[13:22] In Bethlehem of Judea, it is written by the prophet, you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Herod ascertains from the chief priests, the scribes, the birthplace of the Messiah, foretold as being Bethlehem of Judea, and the quote there from the book of the prophet Micah, Bethlehem known as the city of David.

Bethlehem was the home, really, of Israel's greatest king. It was here that David was chosen and anointed by the prophet Samuel. It was to Bethlehem that the prophets looked for another king to come, the Messiah, in the line of David.

Bethlehem was, I suppose I kind of, symbol of the covenant promise that Yahweh had made to David, 2 Samuel 7, verses 12 through 16.

And the promise was that no one would ever destroy that dynasty. No one would ever destroy that kingdom, that throne. The small town in Judah, Bethlehem, stood for the stubborn promise of God that come what may, a Messiah would come and his reign would never be broken.

[14:45] And Herod, we're told in verse 7, called the Magi secretly, found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go, search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, report to me that I too may go and worship him. So Herod sends the Magi onward to find the child to report back that he too might come and worship.

But of course, there's nothing like worship in Herod's heart. He will brook no rival. And that's why later in the passage, we didn't read, later in the chapter, he orders the slaughter of those young boys.

Nothing will stand in his way. Nothing will be allowed to topple him from his throne. And so that's the essence of the trouble that the Magi create in Jerusalem.

Trouble created by the news of another king and another ruler. Trouble stirred up by the news of God's coming Messiah, a ruler who would come and reign and shepherd his people.

[16:00] Herod could not stand to hear of such a rival because there was only room for one person on the throne of his life. And Herod was going to cling to that throne come what may.

He was going to remain there no matter the cost. He was going to do everything in his power to make sure that that prophecy was not fulfilled. And yet later in the chapter I think verse 19 we're told right down at the bottom there those words after Herod died.

For all his desire to cling to his throne and his power we read after Herod died. great leaders and rulers eventually are toppled from their thrones or seats of power.

I'm of a generation that can remember the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The statues of the great leaders of the past smashed to the ground 70 years.

20 year 20 odd years ago I can think of those images of the great statue of Saddam Hussein crashing to the ground broken to pieces.

[17:28] The grass withers the flowers fade but the word of our God stands forever. He changes times and seasons he sets up kings and deposes them. And so in the end all Herod's attempts to cling to power prove utterly futile and empty.

Because in the end even the most powerful rulers of this world are toppled from their thrones. None of them last. And friends what was true of Herod is in fact no less true of ourselves.

All of us will have our thrones taken from us. We're all subjects of the king of kings. He alone is this world's true king not us. And Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi reminds us that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

I don't think he's saying there that everyone will be in heaven. It means rather that everyone whether they like it or not will have to acknowledge on judgment day that Jesus Christ is king.

Every knee shall bow. reminded of one of the statements made by the reformer Andrew Melville here in Scotland to James VI of Scotland.

[18:47] He said to him there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland. There is King James the head of the commonwealth and there is Christ Jesus the king of the church whose subject James VI is and of whose kingdom he is not a king a lord or a head but only a member because the message of God's promised king is in one sense troubling to all human beings because we all like to live like our own little herits as if we were the rulers and the kings of our own lives.

We live as if we were at the centre of everything if everything revolves around us as if no one else really matters but ourselves. But Jesus God's promised king has come to rule and to reign over us and we need to vacate the throne of our lives and allow him to take up residence there.

We must bow the knee to him because he is this world's rightful king and that actually can be quite a disturbing and uncomfortable message to hear but hear it and obey it we must.

Jesus Christ has come as lord and king to rule over our lives he's come to take charge and indeed as human beings we were made for this we were created to live under his rule he is no flawed and failed human king he is Emmanuel God with us and we need to hand the reins of our lives over to him we need to submit to his rule we need to come and bow down and worship him and that's exactly what we see the magi doing here the journey they made the trouble they caused thirdly finally here quickly the one they worshipped verses 9 through 12 after listening to the king they went on their way the star they'd seen where it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was when they saw the star they were overjoyed on coming to the house they saw the child with his mother

Mary they bowed down and worshipped him and they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh and having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod they returned to their country by another route it's interesting isn't it the text emphasises the fact that the magi had come to worship Jesus we're told that in verse 2 we're told that in verse 8 and repeated again in verse 11 they're drawn to worship Christ God's promised king and they bring him these gifts gold myrrh frankincense gifts fit for a king symbolic gifts speaking of holiness obedience to God sacrifice because the only right and proper response to the coming of king Jesus is that of worship and this is what the magi do they worship coming to the house they bow down and worship they are told that when they saw the star they were overjoyed literally it says they rejoiced exceedingly with a great joy they worshipped him now they may not have realised everything about him but they knew enough to worship him and that's striking at the end of the gospel again

[22 : 52] Matthew tells us that after the resurrection the eleven disciples went to Galilee to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them and when they saw him they worshipped him that lies at the heart of what it means to be a Christian is that we worship Jesus Christ and indeed there is something inescapably offensive intolerant about the Christian faith Christianity cannot help its exclusivity because it holds that Jesus Christ is in a category all by himself you look around the world you can scan the pages of human history you can gaze down through the generations but Jesus Christ is without peer he stands in a category all by himself and yes yes there have been great saints and great men and great women and mighty prophets and great spiritual leaders but absolutely no one compares to

Jesus Christ no one else is worthy of our worship the magi bring to him gifts fit for a king gold frankincense and myrrh those were not things you could just pop in and buy at the you know Jerusalem branch of Tesco's these were seriously wealthy and weighty gifts gifts fit for a king now whether or not they're meant to have some symbolic value it's clear that the magi gave them simply as expensive gifts to a great king they gave their best and that's what it means to be wholehearted in our adoration of Jesus it means to give him our very best because he is God he is God with us he is Emmanuel and these magi were not the kind of people the

Jews would have expected to see around their Messiah in so many respects they were religious outsiders pagans gentiles outcasts and yet it's these astrologers who are brought in and the religious elite in Jerusalem who keep their distance and who remain mired in apathy and unbelief later in the gospel that unholy alliance if you like priests teachers of the law and a Herodian king will reappear and in an echo of these opening chapters I suppose a Roman governor will place above the cross that same title that the magi attribute to the Christ child the title according to Roman law only belonged to Herod

Matthew tells us in Matthew 27 and over his head they put the charge against him which read this is Jesus the king of the Jews as a reminder again that Jesus kingship will take him to the cross of Calvary bearing the sin of his people you will give him the name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins and so whoever we are this morning if we're a religious insider or a religious outsider or we're someone of great means or not whoever we are this Jesus wants to take you on a journey no it's not a Star Trek it has another name it's simply called discipleship we're not called to follow the star we're called to follow the Lord

Jesus Christ and that journey begins when we give up on ourselves and we place our lives in his hands it begins when we give up going our own way and we turn in our hearts to follow him it begins when we meet this Jesus for ourselves and when like the magi of old we bow down and worship him let's pray together let's pray God our Father we thank you for Jesus Christ the true king of this world we thank you that he came to us in humble circumstances clothed in our flesh and blood that he might be our redeemer and our savior

[28 : 02] Lord help us whoever we are this morning to bow down and to worship him may he take up residence may he rule and reign in our hearts and in our lives may he direct our lives on that great journey of discipleship Lord lead us guide us bless us and encourage us strengthen us for all that lies ahead as we move out of one year and into another may you go before us and may you bless us as we pray these things in Jesus name Amen Amen