

# Carols by Candlelight

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good evening, and if it's not too late in the evening, let me add my word of welcome to you. My name's Martin Ayres. I'm what they call the rector here, the senior minister. And on behalf of all of us, our thanks to the choir, to the musicians, to the readers, to everyone who's been involved in serving for our Carols by Candlelight service.

Before we sing again, we're just going to spend a bit of time thinking a bit together about Christmas. There's lots of confusion about Christmas. Children get confused.

I don't know whether you saw in the news, there was a survey where children were asked about Christmas, and there were some remarkable responses. Alice, age six, wrote this.

Jesus was born in a stable with sheep, horses, and a crocodile. This was from Ellie, age five. The wise men brought him gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But these are not real presents. I feel sorry for him. I'd have brought him Lego. Jay, age five, said, Jesus was a king, and he wore a crown, even though he was a baby.

[ 1 : 16 ] It was a really small crown. And Charlie, age five. Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, a long, long way away from here, in a different country, in England.

So there's confusion. But for us as adults, there's confusion about Christmas as well. So our last reading was from Matthew's first century account of Jesus' life, and he recalls the visit of the three kings.

And then we sang about them, except that they weren't kings. They were magi, ancient stargazers, a kind of combination of astrology and astronomy in the ancient world.

So they were distinguished visitors. They were learned men. But they weren't kings. And there weren't three of them. We're not told how many there were.

We're told how many gifts there were, but not how many magi visited. And they don't go to the stable. By the time they visit, Mary and Joseph are living in a house. And Jesus isn't a newborn baby.

[ 2 : 22 ] He's probably about a year old at that time. So all those nativity scenes that you see with the shepherds and the wise men together in the stable under a star with Mary and Joseph and the baby, the wise men have been photoshopped in.

It's not real, that. And if this evening we can clear away the confusion, we can ask ourselves, why did Matthew record this visit? Matthew was a gospel writer.

They were selective in what they chose to write about. But Matthew had left everything to follow Jesus when he met him. And I take it he wants to show us four things about Jesus to prompt us to ask, what's our response to him?

So I've got four points for us from this event about the person of Jesus. The first is, he was promised for centuries. He's a credible king. A remarkable thing happened a few years ago. The BBC produced a drama leading up to Christmas, the nativity. You might have seen it. The script was written by renowned script writer, Tony Jordan. And he said that writing that work, the nativity, was a life-changing experience for him.

[ 3 : 27 ] Tony Jordan had started out as an out-and-out skeptic about the Christmas story. But as he interviewed scholars and put in the research, he became increasingly convinced that these events had the ring of truth about them.

And one of the events that affected him most profoundly was this one of the visit of the magi. He'd always thought of it, as I guess some of us here this evening will think of it, as a romantic fable.

But suddenly, he started to see it as credible history. Why? Well, on first glance, we hear the story, don't we? We had it printed inside the sheets there, if you want to look back at it. And we think, why would foreign pagans travel all that way and give gifts to a Jewish child in Bethlehem?

And what's all this stuff about a star leading them on the way? But when we take a closer look, this parable is, sorry, this event is actually a lot more plausible. The magi might well have come from Babylon, which is about 550 miles east of Jerusalem.

And around the whole area at that time, they knew that the people of Judea, the Jewish people, had been waiting for a king that was long expected.

[ 4 : 39 ] And they were now imminently expecting that king to arrive. And then we hear there was this star, or at least a bright object in the sky that they studied. So what do we make of that?

Well, it might simply have been a miraculous phenomenon. If we're willing to be open to the possibility that there is a God who made us, then of course, he could use a supernatural event to announce that something unique was happening in human history, that he himself was stepping into the world.

So it could have been that. But we also, we do know from ancient astrologers at the time in their writings that we have today, that there was a huge stir all across the world at that time, because Jupiter and Saturn came together in the night sky very brightly.

And it's quite plausible that those magi, given what they believed about what the planets would have shown them, would have interpreted that as signaling that a new king was going to be born. So they head to Jerusalem, not following the star over hundreds of miles, but because they know that Judea is expecting a king and has been waiting for a long time for it.

[ 5 : 47 ] And from Jerusalem, they get redirected to Bethlehem. Again, not so much following the star, but because they're given the ancient prophecy, the Bible promise that says this king will be born in Bethlehem.

And they head there. Matthew then says that the star came to rest over the place where Jesus lived. And again, we know around that time from the writings of stargazers in Korea and China, that there was a tailed comet in the sky at exactly that time.

So it may be that it was that tailed comet they saw as they arrived in Bethlehem. We don't know for certain. But however mysterious we find the star, what we today certainly do need to grapple with are the prophecies.

For my money, one of the most significant reasons that I'm a Christian are the prophecies that were fulfilled when Jesus Christ came and made his claims.

So the prophet Micah that we are referred to by Matthew there promised seven centuries earlier that this promised king would be born in Bethlehem.

[ 6 : 52 ] Just as the Old Testament writers also predicted that God's king would be born to a virgin, that he would, as a grown man, have the power to heal the sick, that he would be able to make the blind see and the lame walk, that he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, that he would be nailed to a wooden cross, and people would cast lots for his clothing.

So we don't have a star today as a guiding light, but we do have these prophecies still to guide us, as though God has placed signposts through history so that when he came, we could recognize him.

So that's our first point. He's a credible king. Secondly, we see that he was born in Bethlehem. He's a servant king. Just look again at verse 1 on your service sheets.

I'll read it for us. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 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 Bethlehem, it's a bit like Stratford-upon-Avon. It's a place that's only actually famous because of one man.

[ 8 : 09 ] It was an insignificant town. I'm from Middlesbrough. I'm not getting at insignificant towns. I'm from Middlesbrough. I can assure you there's nothing significant about Middlesbrough. That's like Bethlehem was to them then.

And this is the Son of God himself, not born in a palace, but born in a cattle shed, not visited by royalty, but first by grubby shepherds. It's the first century equivalent of the Son of God being born in a bush shelter, in a bush shelter in Anisland, at the Anisland Cross there, and the cab drivers and the Deliveroo cyclists being the first people to greet him.

Why was that? Well, he was born in humility because that was the pattern of his life. Even to become a refugee, as we heard, fleeing with his family to Egypt for safety.

All through Jesus' life, he spent time with the overlooked, with the marginalized. He stood up for the outsider. Whether you were rich and hated for it or you were poor and you were hated for it, he loved everyone, even when it cost him everything.

When I talk to friends of mine who are not Christians, and we maybe have a conversation about the God that they don't believe in, that they think I believe in, I realize they think of the God I believe in a bit like Father Christmas.

[ 9 : 27 ] I don't just mean the whole white beard thing. I mean more the idea that he's this distant character that you'd never really get to meet, but he's watching your every move. But at Christmas, we see that the God who made us is not like that at all.

He entered the muck of our world because he wants to identify with us, to be with us, to help us. And so that he can be known by us. We can know him.

He's a humble king. And he offers to be your humble king. He won't force himself into your life, but he will come if you invite him.

But he gets a hostile reception here. That's our third point. He was hunted down by Herod, a rejected king. Just look with me again at verse 3. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

He pretends he wants to worship Jesus, and then when the Magi don't go and tell him where Jesus is, in his fury, he orders that every boy under two years in the region around Bethlehem has to be killed.

[ 10 : 34 ] Perhaps 30 or so babies and young children were taken from their families and slaughtered by this man. And that was standard procedure for Herod the Great.

He was a very disturbed man. He killed his own wife, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, and two of his sons as he clung on to power. And the reason he hated this news about Jesus was because he was threatened by the news of this king.

Herod was a puppet king. He wasn't actually a rightful king by birth. And so he resented the idea that someone had been born with the right to be king. And of course, on one level, Herod is quite different to us, thankfully.

But the confronting truth that we've got to face up to is that that same attitude lies within each one of us, even if we manifest it differently to Herod. But it's right there in my heart.

We're not indifferent towards God. Each one of us in our own hearts has a strong urge to say, I'm in charge. Stop telling me how to live. And when we hear the news that there is a God who made us, who has appointed a king, who has the right to call the shots in our life, we strongly resist that idea.

[ 11 : 52 ] I don't know if you play a sport, but I've got a friend who's a cameraman, and he tells me, I mean, it's obvious really, I probably didn't really need him to tell me, but he tells me that when he's filming a football match or a rugby match, the key thing as a cameraman is to stay focused on the ball.

If you lose the ball in the speed of what's happening, you're useless to the producer. You're not going to be chosen even for the replays. Because that's where the action is. It's central.

And folks, we were made by a good God, and he's meant to be as central to our lives as the ball is to a football game. But the truth is, even if we acknowledge God, we simply don't let our lives revolve around him like that.

So instead, what we're doing is, we're taking the good things from him, and building our lives on those things, instead of on him, the good giver. We want the stuff, but we don't want him.

And that offends God, rightly. Did you notice with Herod, it's not evidence that causes him to reject Jesus. It's not a lack of evidence. He has all the evidence he needs.

[ 13 : 00 ] He's visited by these magi, telling him the king's been born. He's got the Old Testament scriptures promising that he'd be born in Bethlehem, and Bethlehem's only six miles down the road. Could he not have just gone to check whether these promises were true?

But he's already made up his mind. So that's our third point. We've seen a credible king, a servant king, a rejected king. But we see another response to Jesus in the passage, our final point.

He was worshipped with joy by wise men, a glorious king. Let me pick things up for us at verse 9.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when 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, and they bowed down and worshipped him. So these men, I've said they were men,

people generally think they probably were men.

If they were women, then they probably would have turned up on time, and they probably would have asked for directions sooner. But anyway, these men, they were overjoyed. It's literally, they rejoiced with an exceedingly great joy.

[14:16] That's a lot of joy. So much joy, that they voluntarily hand over these expensive gifts. Why would they be so happy about meeting this baby that they voluntarily give up riches for him?

Well, we don't know how much these magi knew, but there is something revealing about the gifts themselves. Gold and frankincense are kind of fair enough. They're expensive, they're precious, they're prestigious.

But myrrh, there's something a bit weird about them bringing myrrh. Myrrh was what you used to embalm the dead in the first century. I don't know what you're hoping for this Christmas.

I've got three young daughters, and when you look at the presents in our house, they get the bigger ones. We're used to that, aren't we? As you get older, the presents get smaller, don't they?

Socks, ties, gadgets, jewellery, they're small presents. But just imagine if this year, in my house, the roles were reversed again, and the biggest present under the tree had my name on it.

[15:22] It's six foot by two, and I tear off the wrapping, and it's a coffin. Uh, thanks. What are you saying, father-in-law? But God's promised king here, that's what he gets.

And that's because this king has come to die. Not because he deserves that, but because we deserve it for the way that we've treated God. We've pushed him out of our lives, and Jesus came to die the death we deserve to die in our place on the cross.

It means that he can offer you the gift of a fresh start with God. Forgiveness from God for everything you've ever done wrong, because he exchanged places with you.

And that's why his coming brings great joy. It means he comes for everyone, whatever your background, whatever you've done. The Magi show us that. Why does Matthew tell us about them?

Because if they can come to Jesus, then surely anyone is welcome. These guys were, they were pagans, they were outsiders, they had strange beliefs, and they were from hundreds of miles away.

[16:31] Just as today, we might look at the world and say that in countries like China and Latin America and Africa, where Jesus was barely known a hundred years ago, people are turning back to God through Jesus in their droves.

And we might look on at that cynically, but they're the ones with the joy. They're overjoyed, just like these wise men. I don't know what you're like at buying presents, but sometimes we know people, don't we, that it's hard to buy a present for.

And we say to each other at Christmas, what do you get for the man who has everything? Well, Jesus Christ was the man who had everything. The whole universe was his.

The only thing he didn't have was us. So he came to die for you, to make a way for you to turn back to God through him. We were made to know God, so God is offering us in Jesus a gift of life with him that's so transforming, it brings great joy.

I want to urge you, with everything I've got, to think more about this great gift, to come back in the new year to St. Silas, to Life Explore, the course that we're running, to see for yourself, to ask your questions, to discover more.

[17:45] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we're sorry that like Herod, we have pushed your authority out of our lives.

But we thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ, the credible king, promised for centuries, so that we can have confidence that we can build our faith on.

The servant king, who came so that he could draw near to us. Thank you that he is a glorious king who came to die to save us and who brings great joy when we invite him to be our king.

So I pray that wherever we stand with you tonight, whatever we've thought before, you'd help us this Christmas to take a fresh look at Jesus and to unwrap this greatest of Christmas gifts.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Thank you.