



Opening Responses for Christmastide

The eternal Word of God is here –
love now has a human face!

God now dwells with us –
justice now has a human face!

God in Jesus sets us free to really live –
joy now has a human face!

This is a season for new beginnings –
hope now has a human face!

Let us praise and bless the Lord –
God now has a human face!
Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever been on a longer journey without knowing what you'd find when you got there?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of wonder,
thank you that the good news of Jesus Christ
wasn't just for a few people, but for everyone.
God of love, **receive our praise!**

God of wonder,
thank you that you shared that news with the shepherds –
ordinary people who represented your chosen nation.
God of love, **receive our praise!**

God of wonder,
thank you that you also shared that good news
with Magi from the East,
strangers living far away who didn't know about you,
and were treated as outsiders.
God of love, **receive our praise!**

God of wonder,
thank you for showing us that nobody is outside of your love,
which crosses borders and breaks down divides.
God of love, **receive our praise!**

God of wonder,
thank you that your light continues to shine,
despite all the powers of darkness.
Help us to be people who radiate your light
as brightly as the star that led to Bethlehem.
God of love, **receive our praise!**

God of wonder,
we give you our thanks
and shout out our praises.
God of love, **receive our praise! Amen**

Reading Matthew 2:1 – 12

Prayers of Renewal

The Magi persevered despite setbacks on the way.
Forgive us when we've lacked their vision.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

The Magi followed the guiding star that led them on the way.
Forgive us when we close ourselves off from your guidance.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

The Magi were full of joy when they brought gifts to Jesus.
Forgive us when we worship merely out of habit, or duty.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

The Magi brought the best they had to offer to Jesus.
Forgive us when we give so little, having received so much.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Lord Jesus Christ,
we come to recommit ourselves to the journey of faith,
to follow where you would lead,
to bring to you our worship,
and to offer ourselves in joyful service.

Receive us in all our weakness,
and go with us on our way,
that we may live and work for your kingdom.
In your mercy, hear our prayers,
and grant us your forgiveness. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 2:13 – 23

Sermon

For me, the beginning of a new year is always a liminal time, inviting both reflection on what has recently past, and looking ahead to what the future might bring. There can be little doubt that 2023 was rather a turbulent year for many across the world. It began with imagery of the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia as the main focus of the news headlines and ended with the horrific scenes from Israel and Palestine, highlighting the desperate need for peace in the land in which Jesus taught and healed, loved and liberated, suffered and

rose again. The Covid-19 inquiry has highlighted the serious failings and habitual dishonesty which hampered the UK's responses to the pandemic. A shocking report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation tells of how austerity and inflation have left about four million people destitute, unable to meet their most basic human needs. Our global weather continued to reflect the impacts of climate change by being the warmest year on record, with extremes of heat, floods and winds displacing millions across the world. Also, to make everything worse for us, Nigel Farage made it safely out of the jungle. Given this, it is tempting to seek out a cosy version of the Nativity without the darker aspects, and hence focusing on Herod is not an attractive prospect. Yet, he draws attention questions of liberation from oppression, and the (mis)use of power, both of which are very pertinent right now.

So, who was Herod and why does Matthew choose to focus on him? Well, the most important thing to know about King Herod is that he'd no legitimate claim to the throne. He was not either descended from King David, or from the line of the Maccabees, who led a successful rebellion against the occupying Greek forces, in the second century BCE (indeed, his father was from the Edomites, and his mother from the Nabateans). Herod was only king because his father welcomed the Roman Empire when they invaded Palestine in 63 BCE, and the emperor made Herod king in 37 BCE. Hence, he was a puppet ruler, and deeply insecure as a result. In Stalinesque fashion, he became highly suspicious of those closest to him, and had his wife murdered even though historians say he had genuinely loved her – along with her two sons, brother, grandfather and mother – and all because he feared that they would usurp him. He also disinherited and killed his own son. It appears all this was fuelled by the acute awareness that his claim to the throne was shaky, so it's not surprising that the news about Jesus threw him into a fearful frenzy. Thus, looking at Herod's story offers a contrast between the behaviour of one who clung onto power at all costs, and Jesus's life of self-emptying love.

Now, it is true that the murder of boys aged under two in Bethlehem, that according to Matthew he sanctioned, isn't recorded elsewhere, although it would certainly have been in character. Perhaps this was because the population of the town was small – about one thousand people – and so we are talking about twenty children altogether. Set in the context of multiple brutal acts of violence we know about, from sources beyond the Gospels, it might have been seen as too small-scale to be noted. However, if we write this episode (which is known as the 'slaughter of the innocents') out of our Nativities then we lose the reasons behind Mary, Joseph and Jesus needing to flee for their lives into Egypt, in a powerful reversal of Israel's exodus journey out of oppression. Given how heated debates about the UK's response to refugees and asylum seekers have proven in recent months, this is a highly potent story – God in human flesh was also a refugee.

Through the dramatic device of those dreams attributed to the Magi and to Joseph, Matthew takes us on a rollercoaster ride through the first few years of Jesus's life. Against the backdrop of the misuse of power by Herod, as he sought to cling on tightly to his bestowed title and status, we see the faithfulness of the Magi, discover the lengths to which God was willing to go to dwell with us, and learn something of the liberation Jesus would bring about for all humanity. If we take this account seriously, we don't find God in the established corridors of power, but in that refugee family forced to seek sanctuary outside of Israel. God brings about freedom from oppression having entered into that space of displacement and powerlessness, and faced what was made clear through the gift of myrrh – that the freedom of divine love would be too much for the Herods of this world, and their wrath would be fearful and great. Thus, it matters that we resist temptation and do not turn Herod into a pantomime villain, for it is only by taking him at face value that we might properly appreciate the contrast with Jesus, in all of its full and shocking starkness (for that matter, it also is true for Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor).

So, it's clear that focusing upon the role of Herod offers key insights. Yes, it is undoubtedly true that Matthew's account of events reflects a particular understanding of how the Hebrew Scriptures speak into, and explain the details of, the story of Jesus. However, it also opens our eyes to the remarkable defencelessness and vulnerability God's coming into the world and taking human flesh necessitated. To have a moment of epiphany is to experience profound revelation and gain new and unexpected insights. For the wandering Magi whose status as outsiders is reflected in their names and number not having been recorded in the Gospel text, the epiphany moment came when they finally reached the place where Jesus and his parents were staying, likely following a year's journeying through an unknown land. Herod also had an epiphany – though not a welcome one. Questioning the religious experts of Jerusalem about the Messiah's likely birthplace, and sending the Magi to find the exact location and report it back to him (Matthew 2:4 – 8), points us to his awareness of God doing that new thing which Micah and the other Prophets had long anticipated, and demonstrates that Herod didn't like this at all. Finally, Mary and Joseph experienced their epiphany moment via the symbolic nature of the gifts offered, which looked toward their young son's anointing, holiness, and eventual death on the cross (Matthew 2:11).

Now, there is still more one could say about this fascinating chapter of Matthew's Gospel, and indeed entire books have been written on the story it tells, and those elements hard to explain if one insists on a 'literal' reading, such as the behaviour of the star guiding the Magi to Jesus but displaying little respect for the laws of physics (Matthew 2:10)! However, the crux of the passage is not to be found in looking to account for every detail as if Matthew was a first century journalist or historian. Instead, it lies in what it reveals about human nature as we deal with the necessity of exercising power. Like a wet soap bar, which flies out of our hands if we should squeeze it too tightly, power is a slippery thing. Herod was determined to maintain his at all costs

amid the fragility of his claim to legitimacy. Jesus chose the pathway of self-emptying love that does not cling onto power for its own sake, but exercises it for the good of others whatever the cost. If we would but take the risk of doing the same, how might our world be changed for the better? Friends, let us follow Jesus on the road of life-altering love, and share the riches we discover along the way, so that others may have their own epiphany moments, and learn of God's love for themselves. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Dr Paula Gooder's 2015 book *Journey to the Manger* is an excellent guide to the various characters in the Christmas Story, especially to those we often pay less attention to, like the Magi and Herod.

Prayers of Intercession

You are invited to sit with a newspaper or news website and use the stories included as prompts for your own prayers for others.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Here is gold for a King born in a stable,
frankincense for God who became flesh and blood,
myrrh for the man who died but rose again.
Lord Jesus, embracer of contradictions,
these gifts were given to you
but you gave yourself to us
so that we might have the gift of everlasting life.
Open our hearts and minds to receive you today,
and pour out the blessing of Father, Son and Spirit on us,
and all whom we love and pray for. **Amen**