

“DISTURBED ... OR OVERJOYED”

Matthew 2:1-12

Well, we're in that slightly odd period where the calendar year and the Church's year kind of jar up against one another. It's the first Sunday of the New Year, when we peer into the next twelve months and try to make some guesses as to what might happen (which we spectacularly messed up last year) and maybe work out what we might be wanting to do. But we're also still in the period of Christmas and, on this Sunday before Epiphany – January 6th, when we remember the visit of the Magi to Jesus – still thinking about the ways in which God might speak to us through that story.

As we slide into the New Year, though, it's always a good time to take stock of all aspects of our lives, but also to reflect again on our response to Jesus and what that might mean for us in the twelve months ahead. Because Jesus can provoke wildly differing responses in different people, can't he? Listening to people talking about him on the radio and on television over Christmas – when Jesus is actually at the centre of what we're doing – reading their responses to him in print, encountering people in our workplaces and communities, we find all kinds of reaction to the person who walked this earth two thousand years ago.

And the contemporary responses to his birth were equally varied. Over the past couple of weeks we will have heard the gospel readings which record the events surrounding the coming of Jesus into our world as a new-born baby. The shepherds, according to Luke, were amazed. Mary showed herself to be caring and anxious for his comfort. Simeon praised God when the baby was taken into the Temple. In the same place, Anna thanked God for what she saw.

In the part of the Christmas story we've just read, we see two more extreme reactions to Jesus' birth. One from King Herod, which we read in *Matthew 2:3*, and one from the Magi, the astrologers from the east, which we read in *v10*. Herod, the despised King of Judea, was “*disturbed*” and the Magi were “*overjoyed*”. Quite a contrast – just as the coming of Jesus has always elicited contrasting responses. As 2021 begins, which of those responses comes closest to yours.

1. HEROD WAS DISTURBED

The Greek word used by Matthew here occurs in other places in the New Testament and is used to describe fear, agitation, confusion and terror. Herod was pretty upset when he heard the news from these eminent travellers. For him, this report of a baby who would become King of Jews was a very unsettling piece of news.

You see, Herod's grasp on the throne of Judea was pretty tenuous. He was one of the Edomites, people who had always been the sworn enemies of Israel since a couple of incidents earlier in their history. (We might find that a bit difficult to understand today, with our royal places filled with a mixture of Germans, Greeks and other royal European bloodlines.) Not only was Herod an Edomite, but he was also an appointee of the occupying Roman Empire – a puppet ruler, chosen from a hated tribe and clinging to power by his fingertips. Contemporary historians tell us how he was always plagued by fear of rival bids for the throne.

Herod was a remarkably insecure and unhappy man. What he did not want to hear was that the birth of a rival was being feted by foreign emissaries. Jesus was a threat to his position, to his lifestyle – to his very life, in fact. No wonder he was disturbed! And no wonder Jerusalem was disturbed. This doesn't mean every citizen of Jerusalem, but the people in power in Jerusalem as Herod's seat of power – a bit like our referring to Westminster or Washington today. The people weren't disturbed because they had anything to fear from Jesus himself, but they knew that any shift in the balance of power could lead to civil unrest and to greater oppression by a king already renowned for his paranoid brutality.

Does Jesus disturb you? Does he threaten your security because you've got it all worked out for yourself, because your hold on what you've got is a bit tenuous and you don't want him coming along and messing it up? When you read the gospels, when you look into what Jesus teaches and calls us to do, are you disturbed because you know it will mean a bit of a shake-up in your life? Our lives have been pretty comprehensively disturbed over the past year in all kinds of ways. Has God been using that to shake up your attitude to him, your relationship with Jesus?

2. THE MAGI WERE OVERJOYED

These astrologers, on the other hand, greeted Jesus quite differently. *V10* in Greek has eight words in it: four of them are the description of their joy. It doesn't come over in most translations and it's particularly weak in the NIV. The old AV's "*they rejoiced with exceeding great joy*" gets close and Eugene Peterson's "*They could hardly contain themselves*" is a good paraphrase. Literally it says, "*They greatly rejoiced with enormous rejoicing.*" They were beside themselves with joy.

At the end of their long journey and their painstaking search, they were overwhelmed with relief and with real joy at seeing the baby Jesus. As they recognised the significance of the child before them, they went loopy with pleasure. This wasn't simply a courtesy visit from foreign dignitaries – if it was, they lost their dignity at this point. It wasn't just a day-trip for the curious. There was something very special going on here.

Does the thought of Jesus' birth fill you with joy? Not really, does it? Let's be honest about it. We've been inoculated against it with an annual dose of sentimentality and folk legend, mixed up with some highly dubious pagan influences and a great deal of Saturnalian excess. The real joy and true significance of it has all got a bit lost – and if you can't really rejoice in Jesus at this time of year it will be fairly difficult the rest of the year too.

Wouldn't it be great if we were all so aware of who Jesus is and so full of what he had done for us and for the world that we couldn't contain ourselves? If every day the people who worship here on a Sunday were obvious by the way in which they “*rejoiced with exceeding great joy*” because they had discovered the reality of Jesus – the baby boy born in a stable to show God in human form, who went on to live, to die and to live again in order that you and I, ordinary sinful people, could have a taste of the unutterable joy that we have waiting for us with God?

A few months ago now, we looked together at Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*, as letter full of Paul's encouragements to be joyful. We saw that it wasn't all about exuberant celebrations, but about a day by day attitude of peace and contentment because of our belief that God is in charge. Although it wasn't a noisy expression of happiness, it was still to be something that other people could see in us and identify as different from the general approach to life that most people have, something genuine and worth having. It's something we need to work at and to cultivate in our lives, but this is as good a time as any to resolve to do that. After 2020, the year of gloom and catastrophe, may we move forward into the next months prepared to make 2021 the year of joy at what Jesus has done for us.

Does the birth of Jesus disturb you ... or leave you overjoyed? I pray that it's the latter, and may it affect all that we do this year, for the glory of God.