

It's just 10 words in English, *'Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea'*. With this phrase, it's as if Matthew deliberately skips the joy we associate with Christmas because he has something else on his mind. His very next words are revealing. He tells us the birth of Jesus took place *'during the time when Herod was king'*.

The moment Matthew's original readers saw this, they realized that Jesus was born during the reign of one of Judea's deadliest kings. History tells us that Herod the Great, as he is known, was ruthless. Though he was appointed "king of Judea" by the Romans, the Jews didn't think much of him because he was only partly Jewish, and the Romans were suspicious of him *because* he was partly Jewish. And Herod, well, he was suspicious of everyone, and that's putting it lightly.

So, when Matthew namedrops Herod at the beginning of his Christmas account, he is suggesting something about how things will unfold. The first readers must have gasped when they saw that the wisemen from the East went to Jerusalem and consulted horrible Herod about where they might find the newborn king. They knew how he would take this kind of news. He was paranoid that he would lose his position over Judea and allowed no challengers to his throne – especially not a newborn prince who was fully Jewish and his kingship foretold in ancient Scriptures.

We know what Herod did when the wisemen didn't return to Jerusalem. He sent his soldiers to Bethlehem and the surrounding district and had every baby boy 2 years of age and under killed. He had killed all opponents to get his throne and had no reservation in killing babies to keep it.

Fear, anger, jealousy, threats, violence, murder, and grieving parents seem to dominate the Christmas story in Matthew's Gospel. This is such a contrast to the story that Luke tells in which there is such obvious joy, hope, and praise to God for the exciting news that a Savior has been born. Of course, there is joy in Matthew's story as the wisemen kneel before the Christ Child but it is set against the hatred and violence of Herod. Why would Matthew want to highlight so much evil on the occasion when the greatest good comes into the world? Matthew is emphasizing the theme that is foretold in the ancient Scriptures – that the world was a dark place and that a light was coming. John's Gospel picks up this theme of light and darkness when speaking of the coming of God in the flesh. He says, *'The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world'* (1:9).

This theme of light driving away darkness is brought to life by the star that shone brightly in the dark night sky as it led the wisemen from the East and eventually stopped over the place where Mary and Joseph and Jesus were staying. This bright light in the night sky hailed the birth of the Light of the world.

Jesus said this about himself, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness"* (John 8:12). Just as turning on a light in a dark room chases away the shadows, Jesus is the light who has come into our world darkened by sin, evil, violence, hatred, cruelty and lovelessness. Jesus was born into our world to bring hope, forgiveness and peace, to drive out hopelessness and fear.

The Light of Jesus the Christ shines into the darkness of our lives. There is darkness in each of our lives – the darkness of sin - but for each of us the darkness in our lives is different. Only you can say in what way the darkness of sin and evil affect your life. The darkness may be the wrong that you have done and cannot accept that God has forgiven you – maybe you aren't able to forgive yourself. The darkness may be the chilling pain that a breakdown in a relationship brings. The darkness in your life may be fear of what the future may bring because of illness, the loss of someone close, our own dying. Darkness is caused by a lack of light – there may be a lack of love, generosity, a forgiving spirit.

The darkness in Herod's life had completely overwhelmed him. He could not see Jesus as the wisemen did. In fact, he was so filled with evil that he saw the light as a threat to need for power. John comments on this when he says, *'People who do evil hate the light and won't come to the light, because it clearly shows what they have done'* (3:20).

What a contrast this is to the wisemen. They followed a star and what did they find - a little boy. He appeared to them to be the son of a carpenter and a peasant girl! But they knelt before him, gave him precious gifts and worshipped this little boy, this child, this light for our lives, this light for all people in the world.

This is the first Sunday of 2025. 2024 is now part of history. The things that happened last year can't be changed. There are events that we wish would have turned out differently. There were times when our behavior left much to be desired. Things happened that we could not have predicted. Things happened in our personal lives that we would never have guessed would happen at the beginning of last year.

So we look at the year ahead and its much of the same. But whatever this year brings, look for the light of Christ shining in your life. Wherever there is darkness in your family, in your friendships, in our community, Christ has come to shed light to restore peace and harmony and joy—and he calls you to use whatever means you have to relieve the suffering of others and drive out the darkness that shrouds the lives of so many. Let us resolve to confidently reflect the light of Jesus in all we do, trusting in the ultimate victory of our Lord. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” (John 1:5)