

“On entering the house, [the Magi] saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matt 2:11). What a wonderful tableau. The longings and dreams of so many people, the hopes and fears of all the years, find their fulfilment in the birth of a tiny baby. In human terms, not a notable birth: a not-so-significant family; a small village of little repute; not exactly royal splendour. Yet a striking astronomical event—almost certainly a comet—had led some star-gazing wise men to journey from the East all the way to Jerusalem. And guided by the twin lights of the star and the Jewish scriptures, they have found the child and pay him the homage due to a king.

Why didn’t the story end *there*?! If this was a Hollywood movie the frame would freeze, the camera would pan out, and the words *The End* would appear—we’d leave the cinema feeling happy.

Matthew’s too much a realist for that. He knows very well that this child, *“the one born king of the Jews”* (2:2), is a threat to the man who already claims the title “king of the Jews”—Herod the Great. And as everyone who lived in Judea in those days would have known, Herod tolerated no rivals. When he learns about this newborn king, he’s afraid, and then he is furious. Matthew’s story is a tale of *two* kings and *two* kingdoms.

Herod was a client king for Rome, who had ruled Judea from 37 BC and he was obsessed with his image and legacy. He is known for some landmark building projects, the remains of which can still be seen. He built the harbour on the coast at Caesarea and, most famously, rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. He also built five fortresses around the country, so that he and his family could take refuge if there was ever a threat against him. You see, Herod lived in constant fear of being overthrown. That’s why he sought to prohibit protests and maintained a bodyguard of two thousand soldiers. Any threat to his power was treated with ruthless violence. He executed his brother-in-law in 28 BC for

conspiracy against him. He even executed two of his own sons in 7 BC and another in 5 BC for posing a threat to his reign, just as he had executed his first wife in 29 BC. And if that doesn't persuade you how ruthless he was, then it's worth knowing that he was so worried that no one would mourn when he was buried that he ordered the execution of a large number of prominent men, to coincide with his funeral, so that all Judea would mourn as he was buried. *That* is the man who has just learned about the birth of a child some are claiming is the “*one born king of the Jews*.” Pity that child! Herod’s wrath is fearsome.

Warned of the threat, Joseph and his family flee. It’s interesting. The story could have gone quite differently. Why didn’t God arrange for Herod to have a heart attack and drop dead? Or why didn’t God put some angelic protection around Jesus making him safe from any threat to his life? Nothing like that happens. Jesus is *so* vulnerable. He’s a *baby*. He can’t do anything to protect himself. And those on whom he depends, his parents, are likewise powerless against Herod. All they can do is run, hoping the darkness will hide them.

And so it is that Jesus and his family, like so many before and after them, become refugees, fleeing violence, seeking asylum in a foreign land. Separated from family, from friends, from their support network, from the places they knew, from their source of income, from *home*. They find a place of safety in Egypt, but only *relative* safety. Their position remains incredibly precarious.

Herod’s initial plan had been to perform a precision assassination, but when deprived of that opportunity he decides that he’s better off safe than sorry, so he’ll have every potential candidate murdered. He decided to kill every boy born in Bethlehem and the surrounding area since the star had appeared in the sky. Various Christian traditions claim huge numbers of murdered infants: the Byzantine liturgy mentions 14,000, the Syrian list of saints speaks of 64,000, and Coptic sources speak of 144,000. Matthew doesn’t have those kinds of numbers in mind. From what we know of the population size of a village like

Bethlehem in the first century, we are looking at somewhere between six and twenty children massacred. Herod's tyrannical response to the birth is the polar opposite to the wise men's. To articulate the horror, Matthew reaches back in time for the words of the prophet Jeremiah, referring to a national tragedy many hundreds of years earlier:

*A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more. (Jer 31:15; LXX Jer 38)*

Jeremiah is describing the traumatized response to the exile of large numbers of the Judean population by the invading Babylonian army. Rachel is the long-dead mother of the nation and here she is a personification, representing every mother in Judah, weeping for her lost children as they are led far from home, never to return. Rachel's heart has been torn out—she weeps *uncontrollably* and *unconsolably*.

For Matthew, these ancient words of lament find another, fuller application in the grief of the bereft, broken-hearted mothers in Bethlehem. Rachel weeps again for her lost children. She cries *with* and *on behalf of* all the violated mothers whose children were stolen from them. And to add insult to injury, Herod wasn't even interested in *their* children—they were simply the collateral damage of a tyrant's paranoia. Such cold indifference makes the atrocity even more grotesque. They died for . . . *what?* For *nothing*. What comfort can there be for such mothers, then and now?

This is horrible. This not how we wanted the Christmas story to go. Why couldn't we end with the Magi offering their gifts? Because our world is *broken* and this is not a fairy tale.

But the story does not end there, in Egypt. After a while, the hands of time turn, and Herod dies. The family return from Egypt and settle in Nazareth. And for some years things settle down into something like a normal life.

But the story doesn't end there. Aged thirty, Jesus rises to prominence as a controversial teacher and healer. And things are looking quite positive: crowds of people are drawn to him, amazed at his words and deeds. *This* is surely a good place to end the tale—with the success of Jesus' ministry.

But the story doesn't end there. Just as Herod sought to “destroy” Jesus (2:13) so now the religious leadership of Judea seeks to “destroy” him too (27:20) (Matthew uses the same verb, *apóllumi*). And this time, they succeed where Herod failed. Jesus is arrested, tried, mocked, beaten, flogged, and executed in shame as a failed insurrectionist. His mother, who'd kept him safe all those years earlier, stands at the foot of the cross, her heart pierced. Was it all . . . for *this*? *Why* could the story not have ended earlier? *Why* did it have to have such a dark turn? *Why* has the empire been allowed to defeat this king of peace?

Because the message of the gospel is that though we may find ourselves stuck in the quicksand, sinking fast, unable to rescue ourselves, unable to see a future, God is not aloof. God is not indifferent. God gets into the quicksand with us. And God sinks down into its depths alongside us, and *then* . . . and then he rises again and pulls us up with him. That's the gospel. Because the story doesn't end on a cross. It doesn't end in a tomb. It ends with resurrection. And *resurrection changes everything*. It shines light and hope in the very darkest and most hopeless of places. Even for those who have suffered horrendous evils, those evils that evacuate a life of its fragile meaning, leaving it wrecked. Resurrection says: even those lives can be repaired in the hands of Christ.

Perhaps Matthew hints at this when he quotes from Jeremiah after the massacre. As we've seen, his words speak of the raw, emotional devastation of the event, but those who knew their scriptures—and Matthew and his audience

did know their scriptures—would know how the passage continues. So allow me to read you a little more of Jeremiah:

A sound is heard in Ramah,

a sound of crying in bitter grief.

It is the sound of Rachel weeping for her children

and refusing to be comforted, because her children are gone.

The LORD says to her, “Stop crying! Do not shed any more tears. . . .

Your children will return from the land of their enemy.

I, the LORD, affirm it.

So even for the child victims of this massacre and for their ruined mothers, this is not the end; not the end at all. The end is not in the hands of the Herods of this world, it is in the hand of *God*. And that end is resurrection. This is the gospel of the Lord.

I want to end with the lyrics of a new song, released this month.¹

God on the run.

The night did not end after the massacre,

it only changed shape;

grief became a journey;

hope packed its few belongings and fled.

¹ “God on the Run” from the album *Wonderful Child* by God Aura (5 Dec 2025) © 2025 Unseen Voices. Lyrics by Tony the Maverick.

*Mary wrapped the child in silence,
her arms a sanctuary the world could not breach.
Joseph listened for hoofbeats in the dark,
a dream still echoing in his ears: Go now, don't look back.
And so they ran:
through dust, through fear, through the bones of empire,
each step a prayer, each shadow a threat.*

*The Word that shaped galaxies
now whispered in a mother's trembling arms.
God was learning how it feels to be hunted,
to be holy and homeless at the same time,
to feel the air sting your face and not know if you'll make it to the border.
Heaven once ruled from on high, but now it is crouched in a cave,
breathing the same air as refugees.
Divinity pressed its ear to the cries of the displaced
and called them family.*

*Every mother who ran that night carried a piece of God in her.
Every father who hid his children became a prophet of protection.
Every border crossed was another verse in the gospel of survival.
And the wonderful children who never made it out,
their names travelled with the wind, singing over Egypt,
haunting the stars that had once guided the wise.*

*For God's heart was too big to stay in heaven;
he followed the sorrow wherever it fled,
walking barefoot through history,
refusing to abandon the broken.*

*This is the gospel according to scandal:
that God is not waiting on a throne,
he is running beside us in the dark,
heart pounding, lungs burning,
carrying the weight of every refugee,
every orphan, every mother still searching for home.*

*The miracle was never just that he lived,
the miracle is that he stayed human long enough
to know what running feels like
and to promise that no one would ever have to run alone again.*