The Privileged
Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas Day is now just a few days away. But 9 months before the first Christmas, Mary just have been a young teenager. Think about that: young, female, poor. She would have been at the bottom of the social ladder.

But look what the angel says to her, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-3).

Look at the words he uses: Son, Great, Most High, throne, David, reign, kingdom. Those are words that convey power and status and position and authority. So if Mary is at the bottom of the social ladder, then the One she's been chosen to carry is at the very top.

And the passage from Matthew's gospel that was read to us is all about those high up the social ladder - men like Herod with political power, the priests and scribes with their religious or philosophical learning, the magi who were the astronomers, the physicists, the scientists of their day. And the passage is about how each one of them responds to the One Mary gives birth to.

And this Advent we've been looking at who Christ came for. And today we're going to see how he has come for the privileged, for the educated, for those high up the ladder, for those with social capital, for people who look pretty similar to many of us.

Dangers Up the Ladder
Earlier on in the year I needed to sand down and repaint the wooden fascias under our roof. The problem is they are 3 stories up, and I don't like heights, and so I needed help. And wearing his super-hero cape, Gustavo came to my rescue! And he sanded and painted my house, while I held the ladder.

And as I watched him up there, I wasn't just holding the ladder, I was praying, 'please Lord, don't let him fall off! Because it's a long way to fall.'

Now, if there are physical dangers high up a physical ladder, there are spiritual dangers high up the social ladder. And by reason of your family background, or your education, or your success or responsibility at work or at home, you're up that ladder.

And the New Testament tells us what you already know by experience, that that is not an impassable road block to faith. Look closely at the early Christians and you'll see numerous people with more academic or social or financial clout than your average Galilean fisherman. There was Joanna, the wife of Chuza - who managed Herod's household, so the wife of a senior civil servant. Before his conversion, Paul was one, if not *the*, up and coming young conservative Jewish academic. Luke was a doctor. Among the church leaders in Antioch, was a man called Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod's - i.e. someone used to mixing with the upper-crust ruling classes. Lydia was a successful business woman, and Erastus was treasurer of Corinth - which, no offence to Jonathan, had more social status than being treasurer of Westlake. People actually wanted the job.

And archeological finds in Corinth tells us of the projects he personally funded, meaning he was one wealthy individual.

But if social status or intellect or power are no impassable barriers to Christian faith, the account of what happens when the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, shows us some of the dangers.

And the first danger up the ladder is **position** - it's the danger of trying to preserve your position, or your reputation in your position, rather than let Christ be king.

Take a look at Herod, a man with political power.

The Magi arrive and ask, v2, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" And Matthew says, v3, 'When Herod heard this, he was troubled.'

You see, if ever a question was asked to make a man like Herod sit up, asking 'where is the new born king of the Jews?' was it. Because Herod was King - appointed king by the Romans. But he wasn't Jewish. He was an Idumean. And so news that a real descendant of David, a true heir to the throne of Judea might have pitched up was not exactly welcome. And Matthew tells us, 'he was troubled.'

Now, why does something, anything, trouble you? Maybe when you don't understand what's going on. But Herod does understand, doesn't he? You see we can be unsettled, or disturbed by something when it's got the potential to take things in a direction we don't want them to go.

And Herod sees this news of a potential new king of the Jews as a threat. Have you ever experienced something like that? Maybe someone new starts at work, or someone publishes something ahead of you, or someone more gifted than you in the area you thought you were gifted in arrives in your circle of friends, and you feel just that little bit threatened.

And for Herod, this was all about who the real king is. And as far as he was concerned, that could only be him. There was no room for two.

But Herod's resistance to the Kingship of Christ, of Jesus taking the throne, is not limited to Herod, is it? Now, you are not likely to suffer from the murderous paranoia of Herod. But still, in every heart, there goes on the struggle of who will be king. Will it be you or will it be God? Will it be you, shaped by your surrounding culture, or will it be Christ. And that has a particular edge when you are higher up the social or academic ladder, because you're used to calling the shots. And it's especially the case in a culture that tells you that you're a prince or princess, that no one but you can sit on the throne of your life.

But when Christ calls you, it's a call to cede control. And that means you have to be willing to lose reputation, maybe even be embarrassed or humiliated for the sake of Christ. Because the values of his kingdom frequently run counter to those of the world. So the person of position has to be willing to lose position - whether in reality or the eyes of others - for Christ.

But if *position* is the first danger up the ladder, the danger that underlies it is **pride**. And that danger increases with every rung up the ladder you go.

In his great little Advent devotional on 1 Corinthians 13 Sinclair Ferguson has a chapter on 'love does not boast'. And he tells the story of William Perkin, a young 19th century chemist who discovered the dye mauveine. And mauve rapidly became the most sought after colour in the fashion houses of London and Paris. And as a result, Perkin became rich, and over the course of his career received multiple awards, including being knighted by the Queen. But Perkin was a Christian and he used his wealth to help fund churches and the work of the Salvation Army. And on his deathbed someone said to him, "Sir William, you will soon hear the 'Well done, good and faithful servant." And Perkin replied, "The children are in Sunday school. Give them my love, and tell them always to trust Jesus." And he began to recite the words of Isaac Watt's hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.' And when he hit that last line he said quietly, "Proud? Who could be proud?"

A man like Herod could be - because he thought he was king. But that's the very essence of pride. The pride that drives you to hold on to position. The pride that thinks too highly of yourself.

And if the birth of Christ exposed Herod's pride, it's also the antidote to pride. Because Christmas tells us another king has come, a king far greater than you, a king who calls you to come and worship. And it's seeing him for who he is that has the power to humble us in our pride.

But the second group of elite, or educated people, in this passage, are the Jewish religious leaders. And the danger up the ladder they exemplify is **passivity.**

Now, like many academics who are asked a question in their field, they know they answer! Verses 4-5, 'assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea." But, despite the fact that these men have dedicated their lives to studying the Bible, despite the fact that they can turn to the right chapter and verse in the prophet Micah to accurately answer his question, and despite the fact that there are these exotic magi, who have shown up in the city saying the Messiah has been born, it seems none of them actually took it any further. The Magi have travelled hundreds of miles over desert, but they won't travel 6 miles to Bethlehem to check it out.

They know their bible, they have the answers, but there's no push to go beyond that.

Now it might seem counter-intuitive to say that one of the dangers of those higher up the ladder is passivity. I mean, surely, the danger for people like some of you is drivenness, an *over*-ambition, an *over*-desiring, a showing *too much* interest, not too little. I mean, how could someone who has achieved career, or academic, or relational success, and moved up the ladder as a result, really be accused of passivity?

Well, firstly, because passivity is *also* about pride. You see, if pride can make a man like Herod cling to position, so there is a pride that comes from knowledge - the kind of knowledge that puffs up. That thinks you have the answers, and so you really don't have anything more to learn, and certainly not from those you think are below you on the ladder. And that kind of self-satisfaction suffocates any desire to go deeper spiritually, or to be challenged, or to confront yourself.

But there's another reason, and that's that passivity is about **priorities**, and misplaced priorities. You see, the successful person can be highly productive in one area of their life, but in other areas

there's no drive or ambition simply because they don't think it's important. And that can be very true for the area of faith. Look at v3 'Herod… was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.' So it seems to me one reason these priests and scribes didn't make the trip to Bethlehem to find out if this was true was because they wanted to keep Herod happy. They prioritise keeping the peace over finding Christ. And you can be ambitious and driven at work, but be passive when it comes to getting up early to spend time with God, or reading and teaching the Bible to your kids and praying with them. If you've grown up in church, you can know the Sunday school answers - but like these priests and scribes you can leave worship - heart engaged, repentent, growing in faith and love worship - to others. Or you can prioritise keeping others happy, or thinking well of you, rather than obedience to God.

And of course, the tragedy is that passivity robs you of joy. As we'll see in a moment, the magi go home rejoicing. While the religious leaders are troubled because Herod's troubled. And the passivity that comes with wrong priorities keeps believer or unbeliever from fully experiencing God and the joy that comes with that.

Ok, so if the dangers of the elite, or the educated or the successful, those up the ladder, are position and pride and passivity from wrong priorities, these Magi show us a much better way.

Coming to the One who Came for You

Look at v1, 'Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.' And where they're from, these wise men are just as up the social ladder as Herod and the priests

Because the 'wise men' translates the word for magi - and magi were members of a sacred caste of Persian or Babylonian priests, who devoted their lives to studying the stars. They were experts in astronomy and astrology. And this wasn't just hocus pocus. The Babylonian cosmic records are some of the most extraordinarily detailed and accurate in the ancient world. So these men are the astronomers, the physicists, the scientists of their day. And back home, these men were among the elite.

Now, if you think the idea of such men crossing the desert to worship a new born king is fanciful, in 66AD a king called Tiridates led a whole group of them all the way to Rome to pay homage to the emperor Nero. So, far from this trip to Bethlehem being the sort of thing Magi wouldn't do, it's just the sort of thing they would do.

And they've not just come on the off-chance, have they? Like, 'we were just passing through and wondered if there's been any action on the royal maternity ward.' Something has made them come. They've seen something in the heavens that tells them the king of the Jews has been born, and that there's something divine about him, that they should worship him.

And Babylon had a significant Jewish population. And it was into the court of these magi that Jewish exiles like Daniel were admitted. So there's every chance that they knew the Old Testament prophecies of a coming king. Prophecies like those of another pagan magician, Balaam, who at the time of the Exodus prophesied of that king: 'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall arise out of Israel.' (Num 24:17).

Now in the old testament, pagan wise men were not to be trusted. Whether it was the magicians of Egypt against Moses, or Balaam failing to help Balak, or the magi of Babylon in Daniel's time, their knowledge and wisdom is shown up to be inadequate in comparison to that of faithful Israelites. But here, the tables are turned, aren't they? And it's these pagan academics who get to see what the Jewish scribes declined to see.

But why do they see something? Why is there a star, a heavenly sign, leading them to Christ? Because God wants them to come, and he's written the invitation in words they'll understand. Because Christ hasn't just come for the shamed, and the outsider and the poor, as we've seen, he's come for the academic, for the intellectual, for the successful, for the educated.

And the psalms and the prophets saw it happening long before it happened. Psalm 72 sings of the world-wide reign of the great king and speaks of him having 'dominion from sea to sea, and from the River [the Euphrates in Babylon] to the ends of the earth' (72:8). But then it says, 'May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!'

So, it's not just shepherds he's come for, but kings, those up the ladder. As Isaiah said, 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you… and nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising… They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.' (Is 60:1, 3)

And when the Magi finally find Jesus, their response is very different from that of Herod and the scribes, isn't it? Firstly, v10, 'they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.' It's the joy of reaching your destination, that deep satisfaction that you experience when you've found what you're looking for. It's the joy that pride and passivity rob you of.

You know, I suspect that one danger for those of you in academia is that you see study and research as an end in itself. And there is a right pleasure tied to the searching. Proverbs 25:2 says, 'It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.' But all of your searching, all of your research, all of your learning, is pointing you to something far more satisfying than the search itself. To the God of beauty, who brings order out of chaos. And ultimately you'll only find real joy, a real end to searching, in him.

But then these wise men go in and v11, 'they fell down and worshipped him.' And to fall before Christ is the opposite of resisting his claims on your life and clinging to position or reputation. And to worship him is the opposite of pride. Pride worships self. But worship of Christ humbles self. But it's there that you'll find joy, because it's in losing yourself that you find yourself, it's in dying to self that you live.

And then, v11, 'opening their treasures, they offered him gifts.' And if falling before Christ is the opposite of holding on to position; if worshipping him is the opposite of pride, then offering yourself, your gifts to him is the opposite of passivity. It's a reordering, a right ordering of your priorities.

But how can you get there? How can you humble yourself and give yourself and your talents and know the joy that comes with all of that?

The beautiful carol, ‘In The Bleak Midwinter’ ends by asking, 'What can I give him, Poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb, If I were a wise man I would do my part, Yet what I can I give Him — Give my heart.’

But it’s what comes before that tells you how and why you can give him your heart, your all. Because it sings of how Christ, the one from the most exalted position humbled himself for us at Christmas. The One who was and is the ultimate elite, the one exalted to the highest rung on the ladder, the One whom angels worship, humbled himself and came down the ladder, to invite you in. Because he came for you and to die for you

As William Perkin said on his death bed, when you survey the cross on which the *Prince of Glory* died, how can you be proud? But instead as Perkin said, trust him. See his beauty and turn away from position and pride and passivity, and instead, follow the Magi in and worship him with a heart full of joy.