

"A Savior for UnWise Men" Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2013

The Epiphany of our Lord

Today is Epiphany, the day on which we remember, what can best be described as “visitors from the East” who came to Jesus. I am intentionally vague because, although piety and tradition tell us much about the identity and nature of these visitors, Scripture says very little about them. A popular song refers to them as “We three Kings of Orient are”. However, the Bible never says how many came to see Jesus. The number, three, is tied to the three gifts brought – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – with the assumption that three men brought three gifts. These visitors are definitely not kings. The idea (based on the wealth in their gifts) that they were didn’t surface until the 6th century. And they were certainly not from the Orient. They were likely from Babylon or Persia.

Who are these visitors? Perhaps we have romanticized their identity and think of them as truth-seeking scholars of the ancient world – i.e. “wise men”. The text calls them *magoi* (Magi in the English) from which we get the English word “magic.” These men were practitioners of the magic arts who were often employed by kings. Were they “wise men” in any positive sense? Recent research doesn’t show this idea appearing until the 8th century. It’s not until much later that these men were widely regarded as scholars and seekers after truth. First century Jews would have viewed them as proponents of false knowledge, even a false religion, much in the way we view those who practice astrology or the occult.

The Magi would have much trouble in benefitting from their long trek. First of all, they were the wrong kind of people. They were Gentiles, not Jews. They were not part of the covenant which God had made with the descendants of Abraham. The promised Messiah would come to “shepherd my people Israel”, God had said.

Secondly, while the Magi are seeking a heaven-sent “King of the Jews”, they are looking for him in all the wrong ways. They think that He can be found by their own efforts through human learning and superstition – the studying of the stars.

Thirdly, the Magi seek the King of the Jews in all the wrong places. They go where human reason says they should go – Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel. A king, they figure, should be born in a palace in the big city in the seat of power.

And, finally, in all likelihood, the Magi were also looking for the wrong kind of king. Like many of the Jews of the day, the Magi were looking an extraordinary earthly monarch – a cosmic king - who would rule the world with power and might and provide military and financial security to those who would follow Him.

Had it been left up to the Magi – these so called “wise men” – they would have missed out on the King of the Jews and all that He had come to bring. Yet God intervenes. Our text for today begins, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold wise men (Magi) from the east came to Jerusalem.” The tiny word, *behold*, is significant. It points out something important that is about to happen. The original readers of St. Matthew’s Gospel would have been surprised by their appearance. “Magi did not worship the God of Israel; they were often servants of rulers who oppressed the people of Israel, and they were in league with a supernatural power that opposed the true God.” (Gibbs, p.125) But the text is saying, “Hey...look at this. Look at what God is doing *Magi*, of all people, come to Jerusalem.”

The magi were trying to find the King of the Jews in the wrong way - by their own skill and knowledge. God reveals the king to them through the prophetic word in the book of Micah. The magi had come to the wrong place. God led the magi to the right place – Bethlehem. The magi were looking for the wrong kind of king – one who was born in wealth and prestige and would rule with power and might. God reveals the true king – born in poverty and humility to serve with love and mercy.

We share a lot in common with those Magi. We, too, are the wrong kind of people to benefit from the King of the Jews. We are Gentiles, not Jews. By nature, we have no claim to the Messiah promised of old to the people of Israel.

Like the Magi, we, too, seek the King in all the wrong ways. We think we can find God by seeing Him in nature (as the Magi did) or by an act of our intellect. We think we can come to God and be accepted by Him on our own on the basis of our good lives and our religious actions. We think that, if we live a pretty good life and don't do anything majorly wrong and are religious enough to attend church at least once in awhile, then the King will accept us and bless us.

Like the Magi, we, too, may be looking for the wrong kind of King. Many are seeking a God who makes us feel good by giving us the things we want and need; a God who is there when we need Him, but otherwise doesn't bother us and certainly doesn't demand anything of us; a God who wants us to be nice, but who doesn't burden us with a lot of rules that can make us feel guilty. We would like an earthly Messiah who will take away all the suffering and pain in our lives and bless us with material and financial security.

Like the Magi, we, too, may look for God in the wrong place. Many seek God in their hearts and in their feelings. Others think God is to be found in earthly glory and success; for example, in religious organizations that are popular, have high attendance, and bring in the bucks in offerings. If that is the way the world works, it would only make sense that God works in the same way.

However, like the Magi, left to our own ways of doing things, we would totally miss out on the one who has been born king of the Jews, as well as what He came to do, how He came to do it, and how that benefits us.

As He did for the Magi, God has opened up the way of salvation to us who are Gentiles. In fact, it had never been closed. The Scripture says, God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim. 2:4) That has always been His will. God worked through Abraham and his descendants, not to keep Gentiles out (as the Jews misunderstood it), but as the means

through which all nations would be brought to Him. It is, as God said to Abraham, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen. 12:3) The Savior from Abraham’s line would be for all people, including you and me.

As He did for the Magi, God has, in Jesus Christ, sent us the right kind of king and Savior. He did not come to rule with power and might. He did not come to take away all of our sadness and suffering. He did not come to give us all the earthly blessings which our hearts desire. He came to do much more. He came to give much more.

The Magi came seeking the King of the Jews. By God’s grace and guiding, they found the king in a very strange situation – as a baby boy in a peasant’s house. Had they come back 33 years later, they would have found this same king – Jesus - in an even stranger situation. He would be on trial for claiming to be the King of the Jews. He would be tortured while being mocked as King of the Jews. He would die on a cross, the Roman means of executing the worst of criminals, with the charge hanging over His head that read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

By suffering and dying in this way, He took care of the source of our sadness and suffering – sin – by winning forgiveness for all of our sin. By being forgiven, we have more than simple earthly blessings and monetary gain. We are richer than any king who has ever lived. We have everlasting life without the pain and suffering, sorrow and sadness, want and need of this present life. That has been guaranteed for us by our King’s defeat of death and resurrection to life again.

As He did for the Magi, when we seek Jesus through the wisdom of this world, God has led us in the right direction to this King. He does not require us to find Him through human wisdom and religious speculation. He does not demand us to make ourselves worthy of the King through moral living and religious piety. We don’t even need a star to get close. Rather, by God’s grace – His undeserved love - He has revealed Jesus to us in His Word through which He created faith in our hearts to receive His gifts and live under Him in His Kingdom..

As He did for the Magi, when we look for Jesus in the wrong places, God leads us to find Him in the right places. We find the King hidden in water and in bread and in wine. Through these simple means, we receive the gifts which the King wishes to give to us, His unworthy servants: the washing away of our sins, a new life in Him, strength for our walk of faith, and eternal salvation with Him in heaven.

Although it doesn't get as much publicity as Christmas, Epiphany is far more important for us as Gentiles. Like the Magi, we have proved to be very unwise. Yet God, in His great mercy, revealed His Son to a group of astrologers and magicians, led them to find Him, and showed them where He was. That is truly a miracle. But, what is also a miracle is that God, in His great mercy, has revealed His Son to a group of hypocrites and sinners like us. He has led us to faith in Jesus in His Holy Word. He has shown us where to find His forgiveness, His strength, and His eternal life in water, bread, and wine. Jesus Christ, the Baby born in Bethlehem and the man who died and rose again at Golgotha, is the Savior of the world – for unwise men and unwise women, too. Amen.