

THE EPIPHANY January 10, 2021 (transferred from Jan. 6) St. Alban's

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is astonishing to recall that our celebration of the festival of Epiphany dates to the third century. Its antiquity gives it special meaning because it actually pre-dates the formal celebration of Christmas as we know it. In the beginning, it highlighted Christ's baptism. A century later, it also marked his manifestation to the Gentiles in the persons of *the Magi*. Even later, it included Christ's self-revelation by creating new wine for the wedding at Cana. As far back as St. Augustine in the year 412, the celebrated Church Father noted that "the whole *church of the Gentiles* has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration." He reminded his congregation that the festival reminds us of three truths: (a) God *draws us* with 'hints and signs,' (b) the good news of Christ is *for everyone*, and (c) meeting Christ *alters us*, leaving us *transformed*."

You may recall that during the Advent and Christmas seasons we established the fact that Luke's and Matthew's accounts of the Nativity of Our Lord are quite different, so different that it is nearly impossible to combine or blend them into one narrative. What lies behind this reality is the fact that Luke and Matthew had different agendas. When it comes to the story of *the Magi* in Matthew's account, we need to stand back, take a look at why Matthew's story differs so much from Luke's and ask what this could possibly mean. And the scholars tell us that in different ways both birth narratives are telling subversive stories. Stories that called into question the very bases of the political power that the Romans and their colonial managers wielded in the time of Jesus.

Let's look for a moment at Matthew's story of *the Magi*. And let's focus for a moment on Herod rather than on Jesus. Who is the real "King of the Jews?" That was Herod's title, but Matthew's story depicts Herod as more like Pharaoh, the lord of Egypt, the lord of bondage and oppression, violence and brutality. And his son was no better. Rather, *Jesus is the true King of the Jews*. And the rulers of the world sought to destroy him. From that perspective, the whole story of the Magi takes on a different character altogether. Seen in this way, there is an obvious point being made, and it is clearly a subversive one. The story which we've tried to convert into a children's seasonal pageant actually contains a message which would have been threatening to any ruler claiming to have authority to govern other people in first century Palestine.... or anywhere else for that matter.

Perhaps the most basic theme in Matthew's birth account is the parallel between Jesus and Moses. Jesus is, in fact, *the new Moses* in Matthew's view. If we look at the most obvious analog between these two lives it is certainly that in both cases, an evil ruler --- Herod in the case of Jesus and Pharaoh in the case of Moses --- plots to kill all the new-born Jewish males and thereby endangers the life of the predestined child who is saved by divine intervention and heavenly protection. To anyone reading or listening to this account in the first century, the parallel would have jumped off the page.

What this tells us, then, is that from the very beginning of his life, Jesus was already the new Moses and Herod was the new Pharaoh. And Matthew moves his plot along through five divine dreams and five scriptural fulfillments. The plot and action of Matthew's birth narrative proceed through a series of divine interventions and instructions which are communicated in dreams. Five dreams followed by five directives which are immediately obeyed. For example, the Magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they take another road. That five-fold divine overview operates to control this story. There are also a series of prophetic fulfillments and five explicit references. For example, Mary's virginal conception takes place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophets. And why should this be so? Well, Matthew needs *five of each* to suggest a connection between *the new Moses* giving a *new Law* from a *new Mt. Sinai*. That is, the five books of the Torah are newly born in the five "books" or divisions of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus as the new Moses proclaims: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

From here, let us turn our attention to the story of the Magi itself and the star which led them to Bethlehem. "The ancient world, innocent of streetlights, never forgot the night sky. Many people, particularly in the countries to the east of Palestine, had developed the study of the stars and the planets to a fine art, giving each one very particular meanings. They believed, after all, that the whole world was of one piece; everything was inter-connected, and when something important was happening on earth you could expect to see it reflected in the heavens. Alternatively, a remarkable event among the stars and planets must mean, they thought, a remarkable event on earth." They believed they could foretell miraculous birth by reading the stars. Whether or not the star which led the Magi was Halley's Comet in 12-11 B.C. or a supernova or Jupiter and Saturn being in conjunction with each other three times in one year --- 7 B.C., *or none* of these possibilities, something of note was going on in the world beyond the earth which caused the Magi to notice.

But the point is not to satisfy *anyone's* astronomical curiosity or to create a comforting picture-book story featuring strange creatures from an alien world. No. Matthew is providing a narrative that is "political dynamite." He is telling us through this story that Jesus is the true "king of the Jews" and the imposter is Herod. King Herod is the usurper who lacks any true authenticity, status, or authority. But if Jesus is in some sense the King of the Jews, his rule is not limited to the Jewish people, the people of Israel, the people who worship Yahweh. The rule of Jesus will bring God's justice and peace to the whole world. The gifts the Magi bring to Jesus are the kind that people of that era associated with royalty and heavenly kingdoms.

As one authority puts it, our Magi "stride into Jerusalem like a person wandering bare-footed into a snake pit, asking, 'Where's the baby king? Like someone strolling into a public park looking for the guy they're going to buy a bike from on Craig's List, stumbling into a drug deal.'" And it is important to Matthew to show that the Magi went to Bethlehem, not Rome, to look for the King of the Jews. His audience understands that the Persians, the people represented by the Magi, are long-standing religious

and political allies against Rome. That is also part of the message, and it would have been easily understood by Matthew's community.

The overall point of Matthew's account of the Magi is clear: "this child is the king of the Jew, the Messiah, the anointed one, the new David (as well as the new Moses). And this child is to be worshiped by all, even the outsiders, the *magoi*, from the East, and even Herod." This part of the narrative is replete with references to scripture. Matthew's Epiphany is clear: this one born in Bethlehem is the promised Messiah, the Old Testament successor to David, born king of the Jews to be worshiped by all flesh. God reaches "beyond shepherds at the bottom of the barrel to Wise Ones at the top. God reaches beyond people scared witless by God's glory to those who observe the glorious star at its rising, and methodically, persistently, and sincerely follow it to the king." In fact, "God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people."

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth; Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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