

EPIPHANY (and Christmas II) Jan 5, 2020 St. Alban's S.I.

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

A word of explanation at the outset. Although today is officially Christmas II, the second Sunday after Christmas, it is also Epiphany, but Epiphany transferred from Monday, Jan. 6, to today. So, we are using a Gospel reading from Christmas II which also works for Epiphany: Matthew 2: 1-12 (concerning the wise men or magi and the star of Bethlehem). In fact this passage from Matthew is the one text used exclusively on Epiphany, a passage unique to Matthew's gospel.

No matter how different Matthew's Nativity account is from Luke's, at this one juncture (the adoration of the Infant Jesus), the two accounts converge briefly in a short moment of similarity--- a moment of revelation for the shepherds and the magi when they encounter this infant with his mother.

And from that convergence, we have Christmas pageants (like the one this morning at 10:00) which combine the so-called Wise Men with the rest of Luke's account. Nevertheless, the passage from Matthew for today is the one authentic epiphany to the *magoi* or Magi from the East.

The Magi are no doubt Gentiles and likely astrologers. And the birth of Jesus is presented as a threat to the established powers, in this case King Herod, the client king of Rome. And we mustn't lose sight of this reality, because what Matthew is really telling us is that the child Jesus is the *real* "King of the Jews, the Messiah, the anointed one, the new David."

This child is "come to be worshipped by all, even outsiders (the Magi) and even Herod. Thus the good news of Epiphany is this: "the long-expected King has come for Matthew and for us. The new age has come. The gift has been given..."

This is one of the most familiar passages in all of the New Testament. Yet, most of us know it only in a rudimentary way despite the fact that we have heard it countless times. In fact, the reality that we have all heard it so often points to *our lack of real understanding* of it. It is "not just a sweet tale that gets acted out every Christmas in a children's

program.” It is “one of the most powerful stories in the gospel.” One writer has said that it is “the entire gospel crammed into a few paragraphs.”

But mostly we have misinformation about this reading. The Bible gives us no number of “wise men,” so *the number three (3)* is entirely based on tradition, not scripture. The Bible provides no names for these wise men, so names such as Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar are entirely invented. The Bible never says that they are kings. It calls them “magi” who were certainly not kings. In fact, they were not respectable “wise men” or “kings” but “horoscope fanatics” the study of which was condemned by the Jews. For the reader or listener at the time, they would have been viewed as “the epitome of Gentile idolatry and religious hocus-pocus.” We would probably see them as carnival fortune-tellers or the kind of people who populate “psychic hotlines” or those engaged in the reading of tea leaves, Tarot cards, and the like.

Clearly, they were not “wise.” They were not paragons of “religious piety.” They were magicians, astronomers, astrologers, star-gazers pseudo-scientists, fortune-tellers and horoscope fanatics.” They shouldn’t really be in this story at all. The Jews would have viewed them as heretics because they did not worship the God of Israel which meant that their worship was improper. They were also racially impure and ritually unclean Thus, they were more rightly “models of unbelief.”

It is probably foolish to try to determine what actual, verifiable “star” they were following, because stars or heavenly phenomena routinely marked the birth of great people in antiquity. So a star over Bethlehem --- not a real one but rather one created for literary effect --- would have been viewed as perfectly natural given the circumstance of the birth of the Messiah. Also, the date of Jesus’ birth is unknown except in a very rough way, between two dates separated by a decade or more, making the identification of any heavenly phenomenon nearly impossible.

Some scholars view sentimentality as a great enemy of any real understanding of the gospel. And this is especially true for the Nativity accounts which seem to be drenched in the kind of folklore arising from tradition, not scripture itself. As one authority puts it, “the story of the pagan *magi* worshipping Jesus “disabuses us of all such Hallmark greeting card readings of the Bible. We see this here in the fact that this story “ends in carnage when King Herod slaughters innocent children in order to strengthen his rule.” In other

words, despite our affection for this narrative, it doesn't really lend itself to children's pageants and fairy-tale interpretations, and is clearly "not a story you'd want to teach with flannel (figures on a cork board) in a children's Sunday school" class.

We do, however, seem to understand that the gifts borne by the magi are symbolic of something real. Gold, for example, was known as a gift for kings. Frankincense was burned during Temple worship as a kind of prayer offered to God. And myrrh "was a hint that Jesus the King" was destined to die, because it was used in the preparation of bodies for burial in the first century. But we overlook some of the more basic realities here.

It would, for example, have been shocking to early believers to understand that "impure Gentiles were, from God's perspective, on equal footing with" the Jews.

We don't normally think of the birth of a baby as being associated with the "demise of political power, but Matthew does." This is political parody. Herod saw a genuine threat in the infant Jesus, and Matthew is clearly contrasting two rival kings who rule rival kingdoms, and the one *Jesus is lord of* embraces the whole world, not just a client kingdom of Rome in a backwater of the Middle East. "One king must give way. This is fundamental to the meaning being conveyed by this otherwise charming tale."

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Thanks be to God.

Sources

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