

A Sermon by Fr. Wood
January 4, 2009, Year B

Solemnity of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-2, 10-17
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

THE EPIPHANY story is familiar: Herod the Great was a vicious and ruthless king.¹ The Romans appointed him King of the Jews about 40 years before Jesus' birth, and he held power for forty years because he was an able king, but also because he was the sort of king who could order the massacre of every child under two years old in Bethlehem to try and thwart a prophecy of one child who would one day overthrow him. In the story, Herod first hears of the prophesied child from the central figures to the story – the *magoi* (“magi”), who wander into Jerusalem claiming to have read in the stars the birth of the messiah and asking “Where is the child who was born to be king?” The question shook King Herod up – literally; the verb that describes the effect the question had on him means to “stir up” like water. So a turbulent and agitated Herod asked his priests and scribes where the prophecy said the messiah would be born, then he schemed to send the magi to Bethlehem to find the child, then to bring back word so *he* could go worship, too. The magi followed a star until they found the holy family, they saw Jesus and fell to the ground before him, giving him gold, frankincense and myrrh. And, warned in a dream of Herod's true and sinister plan, they returned home by another route.

Sing “We Three Kings” since you were little, and you think you know the story. But do we really understand it? Which parts are true, which are legend, and which actually changed how the world understands God?

Questions of truth and legend are fairly obvious when you read the story. Here's what we don't know: We don't know if the magi were kings, although they were apparently wealthy and gained an audience with King Herod.² “Magi” were astrologers; it's where we get the word “magician.” They were, indeed, wise and learned men, but we don't know that there were three of them. It could've been two wise men (or wise women, for that matter) or, as the early Eastern tradition was, twelve, but they brought three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. We don't know that they rode in on camels, or that their names were Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar.³ All that is legend.

1 “Herod family,” in *The Oxford Dict. Of the Christian Church*, 3d rev'd ed., E. A. Livingstone ed. (New York, N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005): 766.

2 Daniel N. Schowalter, “Magi,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds. (New York, N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993): 483.

3 Scott Hoezee, “Epiphany of the Lord, Years A, B, C,” in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts: The Third Readings: The Gospels*, Roger E. Van Harn ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001): 5-6. The names of the magi date to the Eighth Century and the Venerable Bede.

But what about the rest of the story? If it's true, it was scandalous. It was revolutionary. Matthew uses the visit of the magi to solve the mystery of how God planned to bless the whole world through the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The story shows us the salvation Jesus brought is universal; it's not limited to Jews but it's for the whole world, even Gentile astrologers like the magi. That's what Epiphany means – “manifestation,” a showing forth, the unveiling of a mystery – that God came into creation not just to save one nation, but to redeem it *all*.

The story also tells us about three things: (1) Lordship, (2) worship and (3) companionship.

First: Lordship. “*When they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother . . .*” (Matt. 2:11a) They “saw” the child. That means they “observed” him, but it also means “to understand.” In other words, the magi recognized Jesus for who he was. I don't know *how* they recognized him, but by whatever lights they had, star or otherwise, they recognized this wasn't just a child, he was a king. He had authority, he was lord over them, so they “fell down and worshipped him.” (Matt. 2:11b) The *only* rational response to encountering Jesus is to fall, which is what the word *pipto* means – to drop to your knees, to throw yourself down in devotion and humility. But that's not the only thing the word can mean. Revelation 14:8 reads: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” Same word, but Babylon was the ultimate symbol of *resistance* to the lordship of Christ; it hasn't fallen to worship Jesus, it has fallen to its destruction because it would *not* worship Jesus. St. Peter calls Jesus a “living stone” who'll either be the cornerstone of your life or “the stone that makes one stumble, a rock that makes one fall.” (1 Peter 2:8)

There is no real middle ground, no *tertium quid*, although we often try to find one. Some of my closest friends say they respect and admire Jesus, even pattern their lives after him in some ways, but they can't believe he was God so his words don't have any real claim on them.

What you've got here is a [religious] faith that . . . is claiming . . . our founder is not just a holy man, he is God himself. He's not just a prophet, he's God himself, and therefore you really can't just respect Jesus Christ, you know that? Because either he is who he said he is and who the Bible says he is, and therefore you can't just respect him, because if he is who he said he is then you need to throw everything down and send your whole life around him and worship him. But if he's not who he said he is, then he's a charlatan. But the one thing is you can't just *like* Jesus Christ . . .⁴

Who do you say that he is? Are you settled in your mind about whether he's God or just an exemplary guy? If you don't know, then go find out. Take your questions to God. Read the bible, read a book on apologetics, sign up for the Alpha Course. But whatever you do, don't let the question sit because it's answer is a watershed, a landmark, something that changes the shape of your life forever. If Jesus was really the Lord, our only real option is to fall, either because

⁴ “The First Christian,” as sermon by Dr. Timothy Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York on 21 December 2008 (available for download at www.redeemer.com/store). This argument is similar to C. S. Lewis' “trilemma” – Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic (like someone who thinks he's a poached egg) or the Lord. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1984): 41.

we recognize him as our Lord and give him control of our lives, or when we break upon him.

The magi teach us about lordship, but what about worship? *They saw the child, they knelt and worshiped, and “they presented unto him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.”* (Matt. 2:11) The magi ascribed great worth to the child – which is what worship is, to ascribe great worth to something – so they gave him three gifts. Barclay (William, not Charles), in his little commentary on Matthew’s gospel, points out that each of these gifts lines up with an aspect of Jesus’ identity and his work. For instance, gold was “the king of metals,” so it was meet and right to present a king with something made of gold. Frankincense was a gift for a priest who offered sweet-smelling sacrifices to God. Myrrh was used in embalming, and Jesus was born to one day die to redeem the world. Barclay: “Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for one who was to die – these were the gifts of the wise men, and, even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the supreme Saviour of men.”⁵

The three gifts also remind us what we can bring to God.⁶ Gold is substance, a commodity, the result of our labor, our vocation. Whatever your work is, do you offer it to God as a gift, something you do for him, not just to make money or build a career? Incense symbolizes worship, prayer, time spent not working with our hands but on our knees. This is the hardest for me. How much time do you give God, talking with him, praying, listening for his voice in scripture, in meditation, even in the words of absolution after confession? God wants our vocation, but he also wants our devotion. And myrrh, which Barclay links with death – that’s our sorrow, our lamentation. God wants that, too. My confessor does this exercise where he comes a few minutes early for mass, sits before the Blessed Sacrament, and then, with conscious effort, he offers God his sorrow, his grief, his failure, his doubt. Can you bring your pain to God? The raw parts of yourself that can’t get over losing a parent or a child, or the betrayal of a friend? Think for a moment – What do you have to bring and lay at Jesus’ side? A God who will cross time and eternity to be with you is worthy of whatever you bring him, and he can take all our gifts and make them beautiful.

The magi teach us about worship and about lordship, but also something about companionship, which is to say they teach us about hospitality. Our companions on the way, the people we are to open our hearts and our doors to, are far more diverse and surprising than we imagine. God constantly amazes us with the breadth of his mercy and the sort of people he calls into his family. The scandal for the Jews was been the universality of a gospel that offered salvation to Gentiles like the magi, but how scandalous is *our* evangelism and our hospitality these days? In a little book about the parable of the prodigal son, Tim Keller writes:

Jesus’ teaching consistently attracted the irreligious while offending the Bible-believing, religious people of his day. However, in the main, our churches today do not have this effect. The kind of outsiders Jesus attracted are not attracted to contemporary churches, even our most avant-garde ones. We tend to draw conservative, buttoned-down, moralistic people. The licentious and liberated or

5 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, DAILY STUDY BIBLE SERIES (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975): Vol. 1, p. 32-33.

6 See THE INTERPRETER’S BIBLE, Vol. VII (New York: Abingdon Press, 1951): 259.

the broken and marginal avoid church. That can only mean one thing. If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did.⁷

The child born in Bethlehem wasn't just any child. He didn't grow up to be just a righteous man. The child was God himself, and the claim he makes on us is one of lordship. If we believe he is who he said he was, we build our lives on him and we let him set our priorities. We worship him by bringing him everything we have, all the pieces of our jumbled lives, and letting him make something of them. And we try to make our message *his* message so that there is always a trail of the most unexpected people following us following the magi following a star – all to get to Jesus, the child born to be king.

Let us pray: Father, we are grateful for this story, the Epiphany story about the mystery of your plan to save not just one people, but to offer grace to the whole world. We ask you to give us epiphanies – open our eyes to see who you really are, to see that you want us to bring you all the pieces of our lives, and to see the others you've placed in our path, people you want to embrace with your love and mercy.

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

⁷ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008): 15-16.