

It's a story we all know, and yet, even when we *know* the story, how often do we think of it wrong? Early Christian artists decided it was just easier to take some artistic license and paint or sculpt the visit of the Magi at the same time as the adoration of the shepherds on Christmas night. You know, have them all there at the same time so you only had to make one picture? And while you're at it, there were three gifts presented, so rather than draw a whole caravan coming from the east, let's only do three guys. It's a nice way to depict the event without causing yourself a whole lot of trouble.

Problem is that sometimes art becomes reality, and even when we know the full truth of the story, what's the first thing that jumps into our heads when we hear of the visit of the Magi? I doubt it's a full caravan from the east visiting Mary and Joseph at their new home in Bethlehem. Even if we auto-correct ourselves, I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that most of us think of those three guys in crowns, each holding a box and presenting it at the stable on a cold winter night. We know that's not how it happened but can you really point to any depiction of the wise men that *doesn't* have this image? Even that major motion picture, *The Nativity Story* that came out about ten years ago, for everything it tried to do authentically, still had three wise men showing up on Christmas night. And yet, as most of us are aware anyway, the account proceeds somewhat differently: <read text: Matt 2:1-12>.

As we can see here, the Magi were not present when Jesus was born, in fact it seems that they only received the sign to that caused them to depart for the trip on the night that Jesus was born. We don't know how far away they had to travel from and so we don't know how long it took them to get their gear together and make this journey. We do know of course that Mary and Joseph had enough time to move out of the Inn and acquire a house in the Bethlehem community. Based on the King's decree to murder the children later on in Matthew, it could be up to two years after Jesus' birth that they showed up. And of course, nowhere is their made mention of the size of the party or how many Magi came to visit, merely the number of gifts presented.

But you know what? These details are largely irrelevant. Absolutely we want to take the word of our God seriously and we don't want to try to perpetuate any false understandings of the scriptural accounts, even if it's just details and trivia essentially. We want to know the truth of what happened and treat it as truth. But this is also not something worth getting angry about or starting a fist fight over when someone else gets it wrong. Because even the depictions that get the details wrong; well they still get the important parts right as we'll see.

We catch up to the Magi as they arrive in the Jerusalem area. They had seen the star and followed its light in this direction, figured out the general area they needed to be in here, but at this point it seems like the sign has disappeared for now. Knowing what they do, and reasonably figuring that if they know what's going on, then the people in charge here would know even better, they go to see the king. Unfortunately, King Herod was anything but a real Jew. He was a puppet king appointed by the Roman government who was only tangentially of Jewish origin and he could care even less for their religious practices. What he did care about, though, was being king. And so when these Magi from the east came and asked about the one who was born King of the Jews, this did not sit well with him. He was disturbed, Matthew tells us, and all Jerusalem with him. No, not because they liked King Herod and didn't want to see him replaced any more than he did. Rather, the King was a tyrant of the worst sort with a violent temper. He was the kind of person you really didn't want to be around when he was angry and he had the authority to do some nasty things to work out his anger when it hit.

Showing his ignorance of the Jewish religion, he had to go ask those who knew the scriptures where this Christ was to be born and then did whatever he could to find him for his own means. "Make a careful search for the child," he tells the Magi, "and then let me know so I can go....worship him." As we see at the end of this account and later on in scripture when he tries a different tack, the plans of men trying to work against God will always amount to nothing.

The Magi, however, do find the Christ and not just by their doing. As they approach Bethlehem, the star that had guided them initially reappears and takes them to the house of Joseph and Mary. They find the child and without question they fall down in worship before him. They didn't know the full truths of the recorded scripture yet, but they knew enough that this child was someone to be worshipped and someone high enough to be worshipped by even those outside his own nation. They were kings from far away and yet they recognized the superior authority of this child. They recognized that he was there for even them. They knew he was their king. And as befits his status, the Magi brought gifts. Great, expensive gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. They brought their best, no skimping to this baby born for them.

You see, for everything we could talk about, the account of the Magi isn't focused on dates and locations and details like that. Whether it happened two years later or it happened as we incorrectly think of it on Christmas night, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if there were three or a hundred of them. As I said when before, we don't want to be careless, we don't want to intentionally get the details *wrong*, but if someone does that's not as important because it is the actions of the Magi that we want to look closely at and learn from.

Now certainly we see both in our Old Testament reading today and in our Epistle lesson that God never meant to exclude foreigners. But the way Israel was set up with the promise of the Messiah made it pretty hard to not think that this was a Jewish matter only. So God continually reinforced this idea that the Savior was for all, that Christ was a king for all. The wise men, as we mentioned, are the first recorded instance of a non-Jew worshiping Christ as their king, but they are there to set the example for us all. He is meant for all people and the very obvious point we're trying to get to with all this is that he is also *your* king.

Let's never let this simple truth slide by us. Now, as we sit here, baptized Christians as members of the church, I don't think any of us may feel an "outsider" status like a Gentile might have in the days of Jesus. But that doesn't mean we always fully appreciate this truth either. Jesus is for you. He's not for the church body of which you feel yourself only tangentially a part. Jesus is for you. He didn't just look at the mass of sinners and say, "Well, hey if we can clear this mess up in one swoop, then let's do it." He had you particularly in mind as he was born, as he lived and as he died. As God he is responsible for you being here and as your savior he is responsible for your eternal life. He paid the price in his blood to make you part of his kingdom, to fully become your King for you. There is no place you can go that he will abandon you. There is nothing you can do so awful that he will not forgive you when you ask. He is born your king. Take ownership of that fact, understand how special and precious it is that he belongs to you.

And recognizing that truth, embracing him as your king, follow the example of the Magi. They gave their very best to this king they barely knew. All they knew was this one was born King of the Jews and that was enough to set them off on a journey that may have taken over a year, and to bring along the finest of luxury gifts to offer him when they arrived. Think about that. They barely knew who he was and yet they knew enough that it was worth diverting the entire course of their lives and offering their best gifts to this baby who was born for them.

You and I know our king so much better than they did. We know what he did for us, what he endured on our behalf. We have seen him live with the insults, endure the mockery, suffer the beatings and breathe his last in torment on the cross. We watched as he rose from the grave in victory. We have heard his sure pronouncement that the battle of death has been fought and won on our behalf. We know exactly who our king is and what he has done for us, so much more than these Magi would have understood. By rights, we should be willing to go far beyond whatever small service they offered in their ignorance, since we have seen the full truth!

So I guess the uncomfortable question we need to ask ourselves right now is; do we? Do we give our best to our king, or do we merely give what we think is enough to get us by? When our God comes by and asks for time from us, do we put aside ourselves and do what he asks without question? Or does God just get the time that's convenient for us? When God asks us to act on his behalf do we give him our best, do we do as much as we can? Or do we give him the bare minimum to satisfy our conscience? Do we give our best to our God in our gifts to him? Or do we give him the leftovers, the remnants, the stuff we didn't really need or want anyway that's not painful to part with but still enough that we don't feel guilty about it all the time?

I don't ask these questions in order to send us all home with a guilty conscience today. The plain truth is that we are always found wanting in some area when it comes to serving our King. But worse than that is never asking ourselves how we can do better, never looking for ways to improve and deluding ourselves into thinking that God is quite satisfied with our feeble and half-hearted efforts. We do need to understand where we don't measure up, but it is the wrong approach to screw ourselves up from that and proclaim we're going to do better. That won't work. Rather what we need to do is return to the side of our King in contrition, apologize for our lack of proper devotion to him and ask his forgiveness.

And then hear him give it. Our King came to earn us salvation through the forgiveness of our sins and that is what he has to offer whenever we return to him. It's that unearned gift that is our motivation to give our best to our king. It's his love that inspires our best in response. Think of Jesus as *your* King, the one who came and lived and died for you. And in response to that love, give him your best. Amen.