

What Makes a True King?

Today's Gospel tells a story we think we know well. Three *magi* arrive at the court of Herod the Great seeking the newborn king of the Jews. They make the perfectly reasonable assumption that any child who was destined to be king would be born a prince, son of the local monarch. But Herod, King of Judea by Roman appointment and not by birthright, has no idea where to find the baby. The Temple authorities tell him of a prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Herod, who is nothing if not crafty, tries to fool his visitors into leading him to the child but, with the help of a divine dream, the *magi* see through him. They find the baby, fall down before him, give him lavish gifts, then head home by another road to avoid Herod's questions.

Western Christianity has embroidered this story with lovely traditions that enrich our Christmas celebrations but aren't really supported by the text itself. As early as the 3rd Century, the *magi* were understood to be "kings," probably in response to the prophecy that kings would offer gifts to the Messiah. Church tradition identifies three kings, Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar, who hail from Arabia or Ethiopia, Persia, and India respectively. However, Matthew's Gospel says nothing about how many *magi* there were or exactly where they came from. Even the word *magi* may have been mistranslated. A majority of modern Bible scholars believe that *mágos*, Matthew's original word, doesn't mean "king," or even "wise man," but "astrologer." Jesus's visitors may have been skilled practitioners of what was then regarded as science, but they weren't necessarily kings as our holiday carols suggest.

Then, there's that star. Astronomers have tied themselves in granny knots trying to explain what happened in the sky over Bethlehem when Jesus was born, seizing on everything from Haley's Comet to supernovas to assess the scientific accuracy of Matthew's story. Baptist

scholar John Piper is right that such speculation misses the larger spiritual point. The star in Matthew's text behaves in a way that ordinary stars don't because God is using it to draw attention to the miracle in Bethlehem. Of course it does impossible things. It wouldn't be much of a supernatural sign of God's divine intervention in the world if it didn't.

While we're examining tradition, a word about those gifts. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were impressively expensive, but they weren't exactly appropriate for a newborn. Bible scholars have tried to interpret their symbolic meaning. Gold, the preferred currency of monarchs everywhere, may refer to Jesus's royal heritage. Frankincense, used as incense in the Temple, may be an homage to Jesus as the greatest of all high priests. Myrrh, a spice used in burial, may prefigure his sacrificial death. Or, as Bible scholar Douglas R. Hare observes, these interpretations may read too much into the text. Matthew's *magi* may simply see gold, frankincense and myrrh as the best gifts to offer a king.

Whatever else the *magi* may be, they're reverent. Because our translation says they "pay homage" to Jesus, we might infer that they're simply showing respect to a secular ruler. Not so. Matthew's original word was *proskuneō*, which means to "worship." In the Judaic monotheism of Matthew's day, only God was God, and only God was to be worshiped. By worshiping the infant Jesus, the *magi* honor not only his royalty, but his divinity. Their adoration is Matthew's way of affirming to his readers that Jesus is, in fact, the holy Son of God.

It's important that the *magi* are Gentiles, not priests and scribes from the Temple. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus came to save everyone, Gentiles and Hebrews alike. Unfortunately, subsequent chapters in Matthew's Gospel have been abused to justify antisemitism and violence against the Jewish people. We'll have to address that later in this church year. For now, though, we can understand Matthew's message to be inclusive, affirming

that Jesus not only saved the Hebrews, he welcomed Gentiles too, making them fellow heirs to the covenant struck between God and Abraham and renewed by Jesus himself.

Although this morning's Gospel may seem almost tediously familiar, one little phrase caught me by surprise. When the *magi* say they have seen Jesus's star and come to pay him homage, Herod is frightened. No surprises there. Herod knows he's a usurper, and has every reason to worry about what the real king will do when he comes to reclaim his throne. But Matthew tells us that all Jerusalem was frightened with Herod. Why on earth would that be? To quote another passage from Isaiah, the Hebrew people had "walked in darkness" and "lived in a land of deep darkness," suffering for centuries as they waited for their deliverer. Why didn't all Jerusalem rejoice to hear that the long-awaited Messiah had finally come to set his people free?

We can't know the answer, and Matthew doesn't tell us. But if others can be forgiven for reading into Matthew's text, perhaps you'll forgive me if I theorize a bit. There are at least three reasons why the people of Jerusalem might be frightened to hear that the Messiah had been born. First, those who profited from collaboration with their Roman overlords and Caesar's puppet king might be afraid of retribution after the Messiah kicks the Romans out of Judea. Second, there's a general misconception at the time that the Messiah will be a warrior king who'll defeat the Romans in battle. Even if a military victory is greatly to be desired, there's always collateral damage in war. Perhaps the people fear being injured or killed in the crossfire.

But it seems most likely that the people are frightened because they've never known what it is to live under a true king. They know Herod, a cowardly weasel who lies to the *magi* and slaughters innocent children to hang onto a throne that was never rightfully his. They know Caesar, a rapacious monster who rules by force and fancies himself a god. They might be afraid that the Messiah won't be any greater than Herod and Caesar – he'll just be an even bigger bully.

Thanks to Scripture, we know what the people of Jerusalem did not. Our Messiah isn't a little tin god like Caesar or a false king like Herod. He's the real deal. Jesus is the Son of God, fully divine as he is fully human, heir to the eternal Kingdom of Heaven. He is powerful beyond description, his strength exceeded only by his mercy. He didn't come to take innocent lives; instead, he gave his life to free all of us. And when we worship him, we do so not out of terror but out of gratitude, because his infinite goodness so richly deserves our thanks and praise.

As Pope Francis has observed, the *magi* bring a breath of universality to the Christmas story, representing everyone who seeks to know and love our Lord. They were courageous enough to journey across the world to find Jesus, wise enough to recognize the Messiah in a vulnerable infant, faithful enough to worship him without pride or hesitation, generous enough to offer him the most precious things they had. They knew the worth of the true king, and so do we.

This morning, we stand on the threshold of a brand new year. Whatever good happens in 2023, and I pray there will be great good, we're still likely to be challenged in unexpected ways. Like Caesar and Herod, too many of the world's corporate and political leaders will put their own selfish ambitions and desires ahead of the common welfare. They will want our submission, if not our support. As Christians, though, we answer to someone better. Our king, the King of Kings, calls us to do his good work in the world with determination and steadfast joy. Our task is to put Jesus first, offering up the best of ourselves in response to whatever life throws in our path. That way, we can fearlessly greet Jesus when he returns, rejoicing in his coming. As we make our New Year's resolutions, my prayer is that we will remember our true king and resolve to bring our minds, hearts and hands more fully into his service in the year ahead. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were precious gifts – our love and loyalty are more precious still. May we offer them to our true king every day. *Amen.*