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# *All Saints*

Parish of Salt Spring Island, British Columbia

The Rev. Dr. Brett Cane, January 1, 2023

*Epiphany; 11:00 a.m. Holy Communion*

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## ***“Reactions to the King”***

**Matthew 2:1-12**

### **Opening Prayer:**

*Lord Jesus, we thank you for the witness of the Magi from the East; help us, by your Holy Spirit, to show you the same faith and joyful devotion, to the glory of our Father in heaven. Amen.*

## **Introduction**

Today, we celebrate the Epiphany. The word means “revealing” and so we focus on the first revelation of Jesus to the world through the visit of the Magi, found in Matthew 2:1-12. These men came from the Persian Empire and belonged to a tribe of priests, much like the Levites who administered the Temple in Jewish religion. They were teachers and instructors to the Persian kings, men of holiness and wisdom and skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. They were also involved in astrology, which is frowned upon in the Bible. They did not have as clear a picture of what God was going to do as the Jews did - they came to the political ruler of Judea, King Herod, and needed to ask the religious leaders, the chief priests and teachers of the law, where Jesus was to be born. But it is *these* people, these foreigners with a questionable profession of astrology and a mongrel religious pedigree, who the Bible tells us had the right reaction to the birth of Jesus – not the people who were closest to him geographically and religiously. Today, we will look at the different reactions of these three groups to Jesus and see how they parallel reactions to Jesus today. I am grateful to William Barclay, for some of these insights.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of St. Matthew*. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), pgs. 28-30.

## **1. The Political Ruler**

First, there is the reaction of the political ruler, King Herod. It states simply, “Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’...When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:1, 3). No wonder he was frightened - the Jews already had a king – it was *him!* The arrival of the Magi was obviously a public event as the whole city was stirred. Herod’s outward reaction is very natural – he seeks out religious opinion concerning the birthplace and then speaks privately with the Magi, asking them to notify him when they find the child so that he can worship, too.

However, this pious attitude masks Herod’s real reaction to the news, which is hostility and jealousy. His only concern is to eliminate this rival – as he had already done with three of his sons and his wife. He was notorious for his cruelty and insane suspicion. All Herod can see in this news of God’s Messiah is something which will challenge his own position. He saw in Jesus an adversary. This is the first reaction.

Many people react to God in this way. They see him as a negative force in their lives, a “celestial killjoy”, seeking to restrict their freedom and inhibit their ambitions. People like this want God out of the picture.

## **2. The Religious Leaders**

The second group with a reaction is the religious leaders, the Chief Priests and the Teachers of the Law. They have a different one and a surprising one at that. They reacted with supreme indifference; they knew all the facts about the prophesied Messiah but were not in the slightest bit interested to see if the longed-for

event had finally happened. No one went with the Magi to see for himself.

They illustrate the fact that you can be so immersed in religious activity and knowledge that you become immunised to its real effect. You can know all the facts and yet it not make a bit of difference to your life. You can be so bound up in the niceties of religion and religious experience that you miss the worship of the object of it all – God himself! Jesus had most of his arguments with the religious leaders and spoke to them about their reaction to him: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). This is the second reaction.

For ourselves, let us beware lest familiarity with the Christmas story and the things of God immunize us to its real power. One commentator has said, “The most impenetrable armour against the gospel is a familiar, life-long knowledge of it.”<sup>2</sup>

### 3. The Foreign Seekers

Finally, we come to the last group of people with a reaction to Jesus – it is a band of foreign seekers – the Magi themselves. What was their reaction to Jesus? It was adoration: “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage” (Matthew 2:11) – they fell down on their knees and worshipped him. When you look at the story in its overall context, you see that they gave themselves to the Lord Jesus in utter, total and joyful abandon. This is the third reaction.

This worship had behind it a number of key components. First, they had to have **faith** to set out on the journey at all. They believed the signs and information such that they had. Then their faith resulted

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *The Gospel of St. Matthew, Volume 1*. (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1894), pg. 8

in **action** which involved a great deal of effort, travelling hundreds of miles over difficult terrain and in tremendous danger. Then, their reaction involved **humility**. After travelling the great distance in search of the king they were faced with a humble dwelling of a carpenter – they were not at the gates of a great palace – and yet this stooping from their accustomed level was taken in stride; they bowed and prostrated themselves in adoration. Their worship also involved **rejoicing**: “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy” (Matthew 2:10). They were not restrained in their adoration of the new king. They were excited and expressed their joy in worship. Finally, their reaction to Jesus was **costly**. They presented Jesus with some of the most expensive gifts then possible: “Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11). They gave the best they had. Nothing was too good for Jesus.

The reaction of the wisemen to Jesus is a challenge to anyone who claims to follow him as Lord.

## **Conclusion**

In the year ahead, how are *we* going to react to Jesus? Will we be like Herod, seeing God as an intrusion, even a threat? Will we be like the religious leaders, treating God’s activity and salvation with indifference? Or will we be like the foreign seekers, moving out in faith and with concrete action, going to any lengths to serve our saviour and worship him? Will we be willing to meet him in humble circumstances amongst the poor and those in need? Will we be willing to worship him with joyful abandon and express our faith more demonstrably? Will we be willing to sacrifice, to give him our best, even at great cost to ourselves? What will be *your* reaction to the King?