

You may well wonder why we have an account of the visit of the three wise men to the manger i.e. the scripture for the Epiphany, January 6th, for Evening Prayer on September 10th; that is either 8 months late or 4 months early. The short answer is, I haven't the faintest idea except that had we continued reading the Evening Prayer appointed lections for all the days since last Wednesday, except for Sunday, we would have completed the Markan cycle of readings of the crucifixion and resurrection. This evening we move to Matthew's second chapter recording the visit of the wise men very shortly after Jesus birth.

So as we contemplate this reading let me start with the cast of characters of these 12 verses. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus we know well. So we begin with the wise men, often called kings. We all remember, *We Three Kings of Orient Are...* They were, in fact, the Magi – the plural form of a Greek word *Magoi*. Magoi are Zoroastrian priests. Zoroaster was a 7th and 6th BCE Persian prophet. He was believed to have been miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15 year old virgin. He founded both the Zoroastrian and the Parsi religions. Zoroaster, like Jesus, began his ministry at age 30. He predicted that other divinely inspired prophets would be born of virgins. Zoroastrians believed that the advent of such prophets could be predicted by watching for signs in the stars. Hence the presence of the Magi in the stable after they followed the *Star of wonder, star of light, star of royal beauty bright....*

The villain in the story is, of course King Herod. Remember this, is Herod the Great not the King Herod who passed Jesus to Pilate. He was Herod Antipas the Tetrarch of Judea the son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the Roman client King of Israel. His ethnic background was not Jewish. He was an Idumean from the region south of Judea. His forbears had converted to Judaism. Herod's throne, by Jewish teaching that the real King of the Jews had to come from the line of David, and by his dependence on Roman approval, could never be secure.

The final character of whom we should be aware does not appear in the reading. It is the author of the Gospel of Matthew. Most scholars believe it is unlikely that the Gospel was written until after the year 70 and possibly even into the 80's. That makes it entirely unlikely if not, indeed, impossible that it was written by Matthew the tax collector, one of the twelve. The Gospel of Matthew is a Gospel focused on how do we deal with change. The author knew a world that was changing rapidly. Two examples of such change was the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 and the growing numbers of Gentile followers of The Way as the church was known at this time.

So what should we take from this passage nearly two thousand years after it was written. Well let us start with the placement of the passage itself. Our passage of 12 verses at the beginning of Chapter 2 follows 17 verses at the beginning of Chapter 1 that establishes the Davidic lineage of Jesus and only 8 verses that describe the betrothed Mary found to be with child. An angel of the Lord assured Joseph that the child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit and that he should continue with the plans to marry her. That actual birth is covered in a half verse: *but he had no*

marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus. No census, no journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, no inn without any rooms, no stable, no manger, no shepherds, no choirs of angels – all those belong to the Gospel of Luke. Our heroes the Magi simply arrive where “the child lay”. The lineage soundly establishes the mortal Jesus as a descendant of King David, but the fact that the Magi are the first to see him connects Jesus right away to Gentiles and not just to any Gentiles, but to Zoroastrian Priests who believed that a virgin would conceive miraculously and bear a great prophet. They present the child with gold and frankincense and myrrh – the traditional gifts to a king. Thus the author of Matthew attempts to bridge a divide between Jews and Gentile followers of the way – a divide that was resolutely deepening at the time the Gospel was written. Jesus was there for everyone - Jew and Gentile.

The second major lesson from this passage for us echoes something I spoke of last week: the fragility of power and the evil, efforts to preserve power cause. In my homily last week, I said: *Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, but his innocence counts for nothing alongside the fragility of Pilate’s power.* In tonight’s scripture, it is the fragility of Herod’s power that matters. At this point Herod had reigned for 40 years ever mindful that he was a client king of the Roman Empire no matter how great his accomplishments. The emergence of a Jew of the Davidic line as a potential competitor, he saw as a great threat to his on-going reign. Only a few verses past our passage, Herod orders the massacre of all children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem to eliminate that competitor. Again the innocence of the children counts for nothing alongside the fragility of Herod’s hold on power. So in a period of no more than 35 years and possibly slightly less, we have the words of Lord Acton the 19th century philosopher confirmed by Herod the Great, the Chief Priest and the Scribes, Herod Antipas, and Pontius Pilate: *Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.* In each case the fragility of power and the dependence on having power causes suffering and death to legions, not least to the Son of God.

In a former life, I had power in a minor way. I was a college dean with multiple departments reporting to me, dozens of faculty members under my supervision, and hundreds of students taking classes within the school of which I was Dean. In time I came to know the fragility of power. As powerful as I was in the context, I knew it was all fragile. If one of my departments had a major problem that I missed before it blew up, it was my head that would be on the chopping block. After some years, I was presented with an opportunity to function in an advisory capacity on a national and later an international scale. I took it. In about 6 months, I remember saying, “I used to have power, now I only have influence. Influence is better.” To a democracy there is no greater threat than inordinate power in a single pair of hands without checks and balances, and for the person to which those hands are attached there is no greater threat than the way power can destroy the soul. The Bible tell us so. Amen