

Worshipping the Savior: The Example of the Magi

Our Epiphany reading is Matthew 2:1-12. Matthew gives us the account of the unlikely worship of the Magi, who were learned scholars, possibly from Persia, today's Iran. They had a scientific interest in an amazing star, or terrestrial body of light, and also had somehow learned Scriptural prophecy from Jews in their country. These phenomena combined to draw them on the 900 mile, several month-long journey to Jerusalem and Bethlehem to see the young child king. The Magi give us an example of true worship.

Follow as I read **Matthew 2:1-12:**

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today I'm doing a lot of damage to the lovely manger scenes that some of you have boxed up till next Christmas. Unlike in most manger scenes, the Magi were not present with the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. The idea that they were kings was perpetrated in early church tradition by coupling this account of the worship of the Magi with Scriptural prophecies of kings worshipping the Messiah. The assumption that there were three kings is based solely on the fact that there were three gifts presented to Jesus. But a journey of this magnitude would probably have required a much larger delegation.

Whatever the historical details, there's something very important we can learn from these Magi, particularly an amazing and challenging example for our worship of the Savior, Jesus Christ. These Persian Magi were unlikely

worshippers. Nevertheless they worshiped the child Jesus because they, by the grace of God, recognized the revelation that God gave to them in their faraway and unlikely land. Somehow the Magi learned that a special star had risen to lead their way to Jerusalem, the city of the kings of the Jews. Perhaps dispersed, exiled Jews living in Persia had taught them Scriptures that referenced Messiah's birth. In any case, they understood that the birth of the King of the Jews would be heralded by a special star. The star may have been the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn recorded about this time (7/6 BC). Or it may have been a star, a special light in the sky which God may well have provided as their guide to the child king.

We have the full revelation of God's Word, which is, says Peter, "a light shining in a dark place." We know the full story of God's great salvation through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Salvation is always by God's gracious initiative, and apart from the breakthrough that comes by his Word and Spirit we remain dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1). God came to these unlikely "prospects," in a land of deep spiritual darkness, and broke through their darkness with the revelation of his light and truth. God's revelation to the Magi shows us that the message of salvation through Jesus Christ is indeed for the whole world. This is "good news of great joy that (is) for all the people," as the angel announced to the shepherds (Lk. 2:10).

These Magi are an amazing example of the openness of faith, which is in sharp contrast with the closed-ness and indifference of those who had greater access to God's truth, namely King Herod and the scholars of biblical Judaism. Herod led the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, "a major feat of ancient architecture," but also was known as a cruel, ruthless and murderous tyrant. And of course, there are those yet today, like King Herod, who meet the message of Jesus with hostility and antagonism, perceiving Jesus as an unwelcome threat. The chief priests and teachers of the religious law met the announcement of the birth of Jesus with indifference. They were able to supply an answer to the question of Messianic prophecy, but they had no interest in seeking the child for themselves. What a contrast to the eager receptivity of these Magi!

The Magi's journey was replete with dangers and difficulties. But that's what faith is, a pilgrimage, a journey through uncertain territory, and territory that is certain to contain difficulties and disappointments, perhaps even dangers along the way. The fact that these Magi were able to take this faith journey that led to discovery and worship is a rebuke to those of us who have much greater access to truth and opportunity to hear the message and join the journey. And by staying focused on the journey and persisting in faith, these wise men finally arrived at the house where the child Jesus was. Worship begins with faith in Jesus, and is an encounter with him as he reveals himself by the Spirit and the Word. And what he calls us to is not an intellectual understanding, but rather a personal relationship with God. Faith then becomes a life-long journey wherein we grow in that relationship of love, trust, openness and obedience.

One note that should always characterize our worship, regardless of the setting, the music styles or even the content of Scripture and sermon, should be joy. Even in our personal worship, if we're seeking God and if we wait upon him to once again reveal himself and his truth and fill us with his Spirit, we'll be renewed in joy. Joy is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22f), and in the words of CS Lewis, is "the serious business of heaven." And when we worship in Spirit and in truth, we'll experience the fullness of joy in the presence of God (Jn. 4:24; Ps. 16:11). Joy is not the giddy happiness that flees as easily as it comes, but is the steady sense of God's presence and the deep gusto of the Holy Spirit who calms and encourages us.

We're all different and meet life's experiences with different levels of emotion. Some are secretive and controlled with their emotions and others are more naturally exuberant. But if our worship before God each day and certainly in the midst of God's people on the Lord's Day doesn't give some joy in meeting the God of Creation and the Savior of the world, we should wonder if we are not missing out on the reality of true worship. Changing the styles of music worship isn't the solution. Rather it's indicative of the need to change the heart of the worshiper. The Magi were overjoyed (10).

That joy in the presence of the child Jesus led the Magi to worship with adoration and giving. Seeing the child Jesus with his mother Mary, "they bowed down and worshiped him" (11). They prostrated themselves before this child in the arms of his young peasant mother surrounded, not by the accouterments of royalty and power, but by the evidence of poverty and human weakness. And this child and his parents were soon to be hunted fugitives. Yet the Magi, with their very limited understanding, adored this weak, so unlikely child Jesus, and worshiped him as the Savior King, giving gifts fit for a king.

We're called to worship one who was born in weakness, lived in poverty and was crucified in utter weakness, humility and shame. He is the crucified Lamb of God whom we worship and adore. It was through his weakness, suffering and death that he accomplished our salvation and provided for our forgiveness and his free gift of eternal life. In a world that worships power and human strength and institutional authority, it takes grace for faith to trust in a crucified Servant King.

A king on a cross is an offense to the mighty of this world, represented by King Herod. They will do all they can to eliminate any influence or invasion from the message of the cross. This is why all world religions and ideologies will be tolerated except faith in the crucified Savior. To believe, worship and adore him means that he, the crucified, must be Lord, and to follow him is also to take the way of the cross, the way of self-denial and suffering love. To worship and adore Jesus is not to become religious. The religious teachers who advised King Herod had all the right head knowledge and knew all the biblical answers, but had no heart to worship, to seek, or to adore the child Jesus (4ff).

To worship Jesus is to acknowledge his worth, which is why the Magi gave him gifts fit for a king. Our worship (a word from the Old English “weorthscipe”) is a response that should be worthy of his worth to us. Our gifts to him should be a grateful expression of his worth and our indebtedness to his grace. I suppose this is the origin of our tradition of gift-giving at Christmas. Our gift exchanging should be a reminder of his great gift to us, the gift of himself. What greater gift can we give to him than the gift of ourselves, which is expressed by the offerings that we give to him? Thus the offering is an important part of our corporate worship.

Worship is an end in itself, as Jesus said. The Father is always seeking worshipers to be gathered around his throne (Jn. 4:23), and worship is our highest calling and will be our everlasting obsession (Rev. 7:9ff). Thus, worship is not simply a spiritual Sunday morning pep rally to motivate us to live for God during the week. But indeed worship is essential for renewing our heavenly, Kingdom-of-God perspective and bringing life back into its proper focus (Psalm 73:16f). Isaiah’s worship in the temple was the context for his receiving his call (6:1-8) and the worship of the disciples in the Upper Room was a time to prepare for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Lk. 24:49; Acts 2:1ff).

The worship of the Magi was life changing. We can assume that they were never to be the same again. Now they were in a position to hear the voice of God and were of a disposition to obey. Even though King Herod had commanded them to report to him about the location of the child (for his murderous purpose), the Magi were now under a higher authority. They now embarked on the long, arduous journey homeward “by another route.”

That’s what worship does. It redirects us in a different direction, from the way of self and the fallen world and its social pressure, to the way and will of God, which is a different direction. Often it’s a difficult way and one the world doesn’t understand or accept. Sometimes it’s a dangerous way, a lonely and an inexplicable way. But when we worship the living Lord and give him our allegiance, it’s the only way. Just as the disciples responded to the threat of persecution with the explanation, “We must obey God rather than humankind” (Acts 5:29)! Worship as a real encounter with the living God leaves us as different people.

Is our worship from hearts of adoration and with undivided devotion to him who is worthy of our best, even our all? Do we worship him with joy at the privilege of being at his feet and belonging to his heavenly chorus of worshipers from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev. 7:9)? Does our worship carry over from the sanctuary to the workplace and venues of everyday life? And do we continue to offer our bodies as living sacrifices as our daily spiritual service of worship (Rom. 12:1)?

I can't help but think of those religious scholars whom Herod summoned to find out where the Messiah was to be born. They made no effort to worship the child King, even though they knew much more about the promised One. I take this as a warning to people like me who can know so much about the message and even the person and work of Christ that I become jaded to the real message and our familiarity breeds indifference. That's true regarding our familiarity with the story of the Magi.

Although our worship services in our international church in Belgium were anything but works of art and liturgical sophistication, being led often by untrained and unskilled musicians, they were filled with the sense of the presence of God, who was honoring the efforts of worshipers who had driven or come by train from Germany, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, in order to worship with God's people from around the world. We also were privileged to be joined by those who had risked their lives to worship where the Gospel is forbidden, such as in Iran and North Korea.

What price do I pay, and what effort must I give, to worship the Lord Jesus, and to offer him expressions of love and gratitude? Let's take these Magi, these misidentified figures misplaced in our manger scenes, and let them have their rightful place as examples to us of how we ought to offer ourselves this Epiphany Sunday in the heartfelt worship of our Lord Jesus.