

Christmas II, Year C
Matthew 2:1-11
January 3, 2010

Two things about the visit of the Magi, or wise men, have over recent years raised some historically critical eyebrows. The first is that this story appears nowhere else in our tradition. Matthew is our only source; the visit is not mentioned in the other three gospels, or in any of the non-canonical gospels. Nor do Roman histories or accounts of the era make any mention of the sequel to this episode, the horrible killing of the infant males in and around Bethlehem. The second point is that the story is clearly based upon psalm and prophecy. Psalm 72:10-11 read "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring him gifts. Isaiah 60:3 tells us that "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Finally, verse six of that same chapter of Isaiah reads "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." These two points have led many people to argue that this story is not history remembered, but prophecy turned into history.

Frankly, I agree, which is precisely what to me makes the story so very, very important. Matthew has done something quite terrifying here. And that terrifying thing is not that he made up a story, but that he made up a story that so exactly captures, so perfectly frames, just exactly what it is that makes Jesus a threat both then and now. Read this story carefully and you will discover, here

at the very outset of this gospel, just why it is we have such a hard time with this man Jesus. So what I am here to tell you this morning is that this story of the visit of the Magi is true, and whether it actually happened or not has no bearing on the truth that Matthew tells. For Matthew was not concerned to recapture a moment in time. He was concerned to proclaim good news to a frightened and violent world, and that he did more brilliantly than most of us can appreciate. So let us consider this story for a moment and how it gets to the heart of the problem of Jesus. There are but two things to notice.

The first thing to notice is that the Magi, or wise men, were not Jews, and couldn't have been in spite of the efforts of some to suggest they were. In that era a reference to people "from the East" who studied the skies would have been seen as an obvious reference to Persian astrologers who lived in or around Babylon, modern Bagdad. Their arrival, gifts and worship, represents a faithful rendering of the intention of both the psalmist and Isaiah, who pictured a non-Jewish world recognizing the sovereignty of the God of the Jews, and of that God recognizing the gifts and faithfulness of those non-Jewish people. This is not a vision of a world wide conversion to Judaism on the part of the Gentile world. This is a vision of a world wide conversion to peace and justice under the reign of the one God for both Jew and Gentile. It is not the end of ethnicity, but rather the end of ethnic strife that is envisioned, not the end of nations, but the end of international warfare. Matthew saw that vision, not of a whole world converted

to Christianity, but of a whole world – Jew, Christian, Pagan, Eastern – converted to peace under the reign of God’s son, Jesus. That is the first thing to notice.

The second thing to notice is that Herod was very frightened. The story doesn’t say why, but it isn’t hard to guess. Anyone called “king of the Jews,” Herod’s title, would feel like a threat to his power and perhaps to his whole dynasty, and it is the most natural thing in the world to want to eliminate threats to power, to life style, to the status quo. It is here in the very fact that such a fear, and the actions based upon such a fear are perfectly natural that this story illuminates the problem of Jesus.

For the modern world is not different from Herod. Rulers react to threats to their power, their lifestyle, their people, in exactly the same way Herod did in the story, by putting down the threat. In the more progressive and enlightened parts of the world violence is a second, third or last resort rather than the option of choice, but the goal is always the same. For the truth is that although all the rulers of this world, all the people’s of this world declare that what they want is peace, it is always peace that means the conversion of other people to the sovereignty of their ways, not the conversion of the whole world to the sovereignty of peace with true justice. When the various rulers of the Soviet bloc spoke of world wide peace they meant the state of affairs that would ensue after the triumph of communism had been made complete. When the various factions of radical Islam today speak of world wide peace they mean the same thing, what happens after the triumph of their version of Islam. But think also about

what happened when President Obama began to appear early in his administration to be apologizing for American attitudes of the previous decade. He was of course pilloried for that by many people. Those people were wrong. Obama has demonstrated that his interest is the same as every other president's interest has been, which is to advance the power and position of our country, to continue that process of the development of American interests world wide. His differences with the previous administration have nothing to do with aims and goals, and everything to do with strategy and tactics, and if he appears to be building alliances with countries previously considered problems it is entirely because he believes we need cooperation from them to gain leverage whereas the previous administration was not so sure of that. And we all want him to be that way. We may indeed disagree as to his strategy and tactics, but we agree completely on aims and goals. World peace is a wonderful aspiration, but as with everyone else in this world, it must be on our terms.

That is what makes Jesus, and the kind of rule he represents a problem, both then and now. In a world committed to self interest, and willing to clash when one set of self interests competes with another, Matthew offers a vision in which self interest has been abandoned for the sake of the peace of Christ. In a world that carefully identifies enemies that must be put down, Jesus refused to make enemies, declaring instead that loving those who love you is hardly worth mentioning. It is loving those who hate you that means something. In a world that claims divine approbation for dealing death as the means of ridding of the

world of evil, Jesus killed no one, preferring instead to die that we all might see the truth that regardless of short term results, in the long run violence begets violence, and nothing else. In a world that wants Jesus on our side, and quite often justifies all sorts of things by declaring that indeed he is, Jesus is on no side whatsoever except God's, and the side of God's unconditional love for the whole of creation.

In every generation that noble goal, to which we all declare our fidelity, becomes a threat as soon it becomes clear that it will never be achieved by converting the whole world to a single cultural, ethnic or religious norm, but rather by converting all cultures, ethnic groups and religions in all their diversity, to a deep and abiding respect for the dignity of every human being. And it is the sacrifice of self interest required by such a conversion that did then, and does now, prevent that from happening, and which did then and does now, make that whole notion very scary, very threatening.

But it is also the reason why we need Mathew's vision of a world at peace with itself just as badly now as we did then. For when looked at from this critical perspective it shows us that Herod's fear is in a real way this world's fear, a fear that grips us all, and it shows us as well what the fear leads this world to do. And as important as this vital critique of us all, it shows as well the path on which we are all called to walk. To the extent that we can even imagine for even a moment being changed by the compassion of God, being transformed so completely that we give up not our culture, not our religion, not our pride in our

place of origin, but our need to assert ourselves over against those who are not that way, and instead give sway to a heartfelt desire to live with them in unity, then we catch just a glimpse of that beatific vision which lies at the heart of Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi. For then we are not any longer playing the role of Herod. Then we are the wise men, come from a far, guided by a star to worship this little child whose name we do not know, but whose life is the light of the world.