

The Monarch and the Magi

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Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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" (Matthew 2:7-8).

The year is about 4 BC, though nobody knows it yet. Time is reckoned in all sorts of ways, depending on what people think is important. The Romans reckon time according to how many years the emperor has been on the throne. The Herodians do the same for King Herod. But this year a child is born whose birth will reset the whole world's clocks forever. Two millennia from now, nobody will say it's the 2036th year since the beginning of the reign of Caesar Augustus. Instead they'll say it's 2009 AD, anno domini, the year of our Lord, and the Lord they have in mind is a baby born in Bethlehem.

Actually, everyone's calendar will be off by a few years. The reason is that, by the time the world figures out who really matters enough to set their watches by, no one will remember exactly when he was born. Even the most important things in life reveal their meaning gradually, over time. We often don't know what matters most till long after the fact. A medieval monk called Denis the Short came up with a calendar that turned out to be short by at least four years. Jesus was born before King Herod died, and Herod died in 4 BC, according to the calendar Denis devised. Hence the peculiar fact that Christ was born BC, "before Christ."

Herod has no idea how all this will turn out, of course, but he knows enough to be afraid. His sources tell him that some wise men have come from the East to pay homage to one born king of the Jews. Herod's reaction is, "I'm the king of the Jews!" Anyone else with a claim to the title is a threat, and must be dealt with accordingly. Even a baby. You can't be too careful if you're the king. You have to protect yourself. If you want to hang on to power you have to crush all rivals. It's a harsh reality, but realists know what they have to do.

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Of course, that's not what Herod says. What he says, when he summons the wise men to court, is, "Let me know when you find this child, so I may come and pay homage to him too." The first rule of the realist is that truth is a tool to be used selectively, to serve one's purposes – and it isn't just kings who know that.

So off the wise men go, following a star to guide them. No one in our day knows exactly what that means. For sure, it doesn't mean what the Christmas cards show, as if some giant spotlight shone down on the manger. Whatever the star of Bethlehem is, it's subtle. You have to know what to look for, or you'll miss it altogether. You have to be wise, in other words. The wise men are magi, astronomers and astrologers in that ancient mix of science and superstition – but that's enough to lead them to Jesus.

Guided by the star, and guided most of all by God, the wise men find the baby and give him their gifts. Since God orchestrates this whole event largely through dreams, the wise men are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they head home by a different route.

Needless to say, Herod is furious when he finds out. He had hoped to arrange some unfortunate accident for the infant king, but now all he knows is that his rival is a boy born in Bethlehem in the last couple of years. By the way, that fact led the astronomer Johannes Kepler to speculate in the 17th century that the star of Bethlehem may have involved a conjunction of planets, which he calculated would have occurred first in 7 BC, giving the magi time enough to organize a trip several hundred miles to the west in time for Jesus' birth.

In any case, Herod decides what people in power often decide when they're not sure who the threat really is. He says of all the boys in Bethlehem, two years old or younger, "Kill them all." It's not that many, since Bethlehem is not a big town. But it has to be done. The king can never be too careful when it comes to protecting his power.

Well that's what happens, according to Matthew. The question is, what does it mean?

When we read the Bible, it's best not to focus entirely on the history. And certainly don't get hung up on the details, like what exactly was the star of Bethlehem, and how did the wise men know to follow it? Better to ask instead, what's the point? Why does Matthew go to the trouble of telling us all this?

The answer lies in the spiritual truth of the text. Much of what's in the Bible points to the reality in each of our souls. That's why these Christmas texts are so easily misunderstood. People think they've heard it all before. They know the plot, and they think that's all there is to it. But the plot is just the beginning. The point is how it shapes our souls.

So here's a question to ponder: Why does the coming of Jesus cause the monarch to fear and the magi to rejoice? Why is Christmas good news to the wise men and bad news to the king? And which parts of us are like the monarch, and which are like the magi?

Christians tell the Christmas story as if it were obviously good news for everyone. But clearly it isn't. The story itself tells us that. The wise men worship baby Jesus, Herod tries to kill him. Is it really true that the coming of Christ brings joy to all of us? Is there no part of us that would just as soon get rid of Jesus too?

That may sound like a strange question, coming from the pulpit at Christmas time, but think about it. Jesus comes not just as a cute little baby, but as the one who will be king. Kings intend to rule. Herod understands that – which is why he has to get rid of Jesus. Herod understands that only one person can sit on the throne, and if Jesus is king, then Herod is not.

The same is true for us. Christ comes to be our king. In the liturgical calendar, Christ the King Sunday falls just before Advent, reminding us that the one whose coming we await in Advent, and celebrate at Christmas, intends to rule heaven and earth, and all of us.

Surely there are parts of us for whom that's not good news. Those are the parts that want to hang on to the throne, the ones that want to stay in charge. For many of us, that's most of us.

It's all well and good for Jesus to come and save us, if we need to be saved. As long as Jesus makes everything turn out all right for us in the end, we welcome him. And of course we want life after death. But if he wants to be in charge of *this* life, and every part of this life – well that's a different story.

Most of us have things we want to hold on to, places where we want to stay in control. We have material things and money we want to keep, and we don't want Jesus to mess with that. We have plans, and we don't want Jesus to get in

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the way of them. We have our anger and our resentments, and we don't want to be told that we have to let them go and forgive the people we're angry with. We have secret vices and obsessions, and we don't want to give those up, even if we're ashamed of them sometimes. We have all kinds of things going on that we suspect Jesus would change, and we don't want to let him anywhere near those things.

In all those parts of our lives – and there are a lot of them – we're more like the monarch than the magi. We don't literally set out to kill Jesus, but we want to keep him out of the way so he won't interfere with anything that matters. That was Herod's whole purpose: to keep Jesus from interfering.

Of course we pay lip service to Jesus. We act like we want to be magi and pay him homage. But Herod did that too. He told the wise men he wanted to honor the newborn king, even as he made plans to neutralize the threat.

If we're honest, we can recognize parts of us that are much more like the monarch than the magi. It's not hard to see why. We like to be in control. We think it's good to be the king.

How then does anyone become a wise man, or a wise woman? What makes some people, when they see the star of Bethlehem, saddle up their camels, and gather up their gifts, and travel as far as they have to go, to bow down before Jesus and rise up to serve him?

Whatever makes people do that, it's what makes them wise. They see things that others don't see. They know that even kings, with all their power and prestige and property, are just mortals who will die soon enough, and then what? Even if they call you Great, your arm's still too short to box with God. Even if you live as though it's all about you, and people reckon time by the year of your reign, soon time will be reckoned by the reign of another, and the proudest king on earth will look like just another pretentious fool.

The magi know that sometimes we're better off not being in charge. When it comes to our pride and our passions and even our possessions, the only way not to be ruled by them is to be ruled by someone greater than ourselves – someone who knows, better than we know, what's best for us. The magi understand that every one of us is ruled by something, and the only one wise enough, and good enough, and strong enough to rule us well, is God.

Like most of the stories in the Bible, the Christmas story runs far deeper than we realize. It isn't just about what happened long ago, a tale we've heard so many times that we know it all by heart. No, the Christmas story is about what goes on in each of our hearts every day, all the time. It's about the Christ who comes to be Lord of heaven and earth, and Lord of our lives – and whether we meet him like the monarch or the magi.