

Five Kings

Today is the eleventh day of Christmas, a day sometimes associated with pipers piping and the rest of the list, but as previously mentioned I'm going to fast forward us by two days and dig into the primary scripture for the Feast of the Epiphany, which is officially on January 6 but can be celebrated on the nearest Sunday. For those of you who, like me, grew up in non-liturgical Christian traditions, some brief refresher about the Feast and season of Epiphany may be in order. The word "Epiphany" comes from a Greek word, *επιφανεια*, literally meaning "to shine forth." The word also had the connotations of "to show forth" or "appear," which is the root of its English meaning today. We also use the word to mean, "a moment of sudden intuitive understanding; flash of insight." But initially, in Greek and in English, epiphany had to do with the appearance of a god and particularly for Christians, of course, the revealing of Jesus as the Son of God.

If you trace the history of the celebration of Epiphany in Church history, you'll find that the feast probably originated in the Eastern Churches, those in Asia Minor, Syria and Armenia. For them, it was connected with the first appearance of Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism when his nature was revealed by the appearance of the Holy Spirit and by the utterance of the Father from heaven. Later, the Feast of Epiphany in the East also became associated with Christ's first appearance (or epiphany) as a miracle worker – the wedding at Cana. As the observance of this celebration moved west, into the sphere of the Church of Rome where Christmas was a greater celebration than in the East, it became associated with the Christmas story and the first appearance of Christ to the Gentiles, the visit of the Magi.

Over time, in the Christian West, the Feast of Epiphany lengthened into the season of Epiphany so that a number of stories of Jesus being revealed as the Christ could be celebrated. In some traditions, the season of Epiphany lasts until the beginning of Lent and includes reading such stories as the previously mentioned baptism and wedding at Cana as well as the Presentation of the baby Jesus in the Temple, where his Messiahship was proclaimed by Simeon and Anna, the calling and confession of Nathanael, and the confession of Peter. In this tradition, the last Sunday of Epiphany is always celebrated as Transfiguration Sunday. You won't hear me preach on all of these stories every year because of the moving dates of Lent and because I tend to substitute some more modern traditions such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

But it's been a few years since I actually told the story of the Magi from the pulpit and I thought that it was high time to remedy that. It's a story that children of all ages love and it's a story more celebrated in much of the world than our North American and primarily northern European heritages will admit. As more and more of our neighbors come from South and Central American origins, we will need to learn to celebrate *El Dia de los Reyes* with them so that we can provide the kind of hospitality and friendship that our faith calls us to share. And each of the five "kings" presented in this story has something to say to us this morning, whether they stand as exemplars of faith or as cautionary examples.

Our passage opens with mention of one king in particular, a king who has left a reputation for cruelty down the centuries, even outside of the Biblical record. Herod I, sometimes known as Herod the Great, was the ruler of much of Biblical Israel for over 40 years, beginning as the governor of Galilee in approximately 49 BCE and then as the Roman appointed King of the Jews

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roughly 10 years later. Herod was no Galilean nor even, strictly speaking, a Jew. He was from Idumæa, south of Judea, the kingdom known in the Old Testament as Edom. His forebears had been forcibly converted to Judaism by the armies of the Hasmonean Kingdom of Israel during their brief independence in the second century BCE, but the lifestyle of Herod and his family was a constant source of criticism from faithful Jews, who resented the interloper. After his appointment by the Romans, Herod sought to give his rule the air of Jewish legitimacy by marrying the niece of the last Hasmonean king but failed to reckon on the backlash he got from banishing his first wife and their son. This was a bit of a pattern for Herod in a couple of ways. He would perform an act calculated to raise his standing with his people, such as his magnificent renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem, then undercut it by raising taxes to pay for the work. He was also ruthless with his family if he thought they were standing in the way of his plans. It was well-known that he had executed one wife and three sons. Knowing that Herod's few religious scruples prevented him from eating pork, his patron, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, wryly commented that he would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son. So you can imagine Herod's reaction when the travelers from the East came asking about the new "king of the Jews."

It has become customary for us to refer to Herod's visitors almost interchangeably as the "three wise men" or "the three kings" but in fact, Matthew provides almost none of this information. Matthew's Greek word for them, *μαγοι*, is the root of our word magic. They were the scientists of the day, probably from Babylon or Persia. The science they practiced was what today we would call astrology. Matthew doesn't actually tell us how many of them there are. Over the years, the tradition grew that there were three because they brought three gifts, just as the tradition became to refer to them as kings because Psalm 72, in a verse not quoted in our Call to Worship, tells how kings from the East will bring gold to the young King of Israel. Quite a number of traditions have grown up around these mysterious men over the centuries. They have acquired names: Caspar (or Gaspar), Melchior, and Balthazar. They have acquired varying backstories: between them they represent the three ages of (adult) man, three geographical and cultural areas, and sometimes other things. In the normal Western account, reflected in art by the 14th century, Caspar is old, normally with a white beard, and gives the gold; he is "King of Tarsus, land of merchants" on the Mediterranean coast of modern Turkey. Melchior is middle-aged, giving frankincense from his native Arabia, and Balthazar is a young man, very often and increasingly black-skinned, with myrrh from Saba (modern south Yemen), and comes from there or from Ethiopia or other parts of Africa. A modern treatment of an extension of their story is the delightful opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, written for NBC by Gian-Carlo Menotti in 1951. I labored as an assistant director and lighting designer for a production in Louisville in 1984 in which the elderly and rather deaf Caspar was played by a young Chinese man, thereby broadening the diversity of the Magi even farther.

I mention this because I think it is one of the important salutary lessons for us in Matthew's story. If we are to take seriously the idea that Jesus was revealed as the Savior for the Gentiles as well as the Jews at the Epiphany, we had better remember that gentiles means "the nations" and not just "those nice Western Europeans who will eventually descend from the Church of Rome." The history of the world even after the Christ-event has shown that Christians are just as bad as everyone else at falling into tribalism, at demonizing the "other," at scorning people who do not look, or act, or dress as they are accustomed. How might the history of the United States be different, do you suppose, had the avowedly Christian settlers from Europe treated the Native

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Americans more as brothers and sisters and neighbors to be loved and less as impediments to their own desires? Or if their descendants, not very many years later, had not seized upon the expeditious introduction of slaves from Africa, perhaps themselves descendants of King Balthazar who had worshipped the babe, in order to make their fortunes, rather than seeking their freedom and embracing them in the Lord? Our track record as a nation really hasn't changed much. 11:00 Sunday, as noted by Dr. King, is still the most segregated hour in America. We still choose whether or not to welcome those who come to our land of plenty by reference to their nation of origin, with preference given to those who look like us and speak our language. And yet Matthew seems to indicate that all of these strange characters, these unclean heathen, were welcome at the crèche.

Even if we discard the post-Biblical traditions surrounding the Magi and dig for a more authentic story, the same lesson pertains. Kenneth E. Bailey makes some important points about the Magi in his book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes. He calls into question the traditional origin of the travelers. While it is true that “μαγοι” or magi was used by the Greek-speaking world of the first century to refer to wise men from Persia, Bailey believes they may have come a far shorter distance. To the simple villagers of Bethlehem, who told the story at first, anything east of the Jordan was “the East.” In fact, that is how residents of Israel and Palestine use the phrase today. The “Magi” may have never seen Persia at all. Instead, they may have been from Arabia. They brought the child gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is mined in Arabia and in many other places in the world, but frankincense and myrrh are harvested only from trees that grow in southern Arabia. We have evidence from the Early Church that the wise men were Arabs rather than Persians. Writing around 160 A.D., Justin Martyr, a Palestinian Christian from Caesarea, specifically says, “The wise men came from Arabia,” an assertion he repeats five times. As a kind of clincher for this theory, Bailey cites the field work of a British scholar in the 1920s, E.F.F. Bishop. Bishop visited with a Bedouin tribe in Jordan who were called *al-Kokabani*. In Arabic, this means “Those who study/follow the planets.” Bishop was told that the tribe's name came from their ancestor's study of the planets and that they had traveled west in ancient times to honor the Muslim prophet, Issa. We, of course, know him by his Latinized name: Jesus.

When we consider the current state of misunderstanding, distrust and outright war between the Christian West and the Muslim East, we need to remember that the clash is far more about cultures than it is about faith. Our Muslim brothers and sisters do not worship Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity but they do hold him in high esteem as a prophet of Allah. If this were not true, it would hardly be possible that the tradition of the *al-Kokabani* would have been preserved or repeated to foreigners. If the divide between Islamic and (nominally) Christian cultures was really about religion, it would be a point of shame for an Arab tribe to be linked with the founder of Christianity. But the Holy Koran praises both Jesus and Mary and calls for good relations between followers of Islam and the other “People of the Book,” Jews and Christians. In the providence of God, the three Abrahamic religions are linked at the cradle of Bethlehem: Mary, Joseph and Jesus, good Jews all; the future followers of Jesus who became known as Christians; and the descendants of the Wise Men, who followed a servant of God from their own nation in submission to Allah, Islam.

As I think of the Magi this morning, however many there may have been and from wherever they may have travelled, I am impressed by their faithfulness. It cannot have been easy for them to

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have travelled even from Arabia, simply on the conviction of their science. The gifts they brought to the child were costly. What could they have expected to gain from such a display? Perhaps, simply the knowledge that they had done the right thing, that they had paid homage to one who would someday bless the world. Meanwhile, all around us, our culture seems far more in tune with Herod, ready to destroy anyone who gets in the way of business as usual. Matthew goes on to tell that Herod, foiled by the magi's disobedience to his request that they reveal the whereabouts of the child to him, simply sought to forestall the prophesied change in regime by killing all possible candidates. American society may not be dominated by those who would outright slaughter such innocents but we have certainly handed the keys of our earthly kingdom to those who will brook no interruption in the free trade in weapons, regardless of how many fall into unwary or unbalanced hands, so that a two-year old may fatally shoot his mother or madmen may stalk police officers or open fire on entire classrooms of children. We need more of the magi in our world and less of Herod.

But there is a fifth king in this story. He has no lines; he barely appears but he is the reason for the story, the reason for the journey, the reason for the brutal panic of an evil man. The magi found him worthy of homage, of worship, and so do we. The gifts they brought him are symbols of why. The great theologian of the Early Church, Origen, puts it succinctly: "gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and incense, as to a God." In a humble house, in an unprepossessing village, with his very ordinary parents, the travelers found the One they had sought, the Word become Flesh, the Son of David. And though they may not have known it at the time, they brought to the tiny boy the gift that would mark his great act as a man – the myrrh to anoint him at his death, the death which he accepted as necessary for us, the death for which he was both born and raised again.

As is our custom, we remember today that death, that body broken, that blood shed. We remember his love, the very love of God made visible. We remember the lowly beginning and what seemed to be the shameful end. But we also remember that God raised him up as a sign and a promise to us that God's love waits for us at the end as well. And with God's love waiting for us, what can we not dare? We can dare to push ourselves out of our comfort zones. We can dare to welcome those who are different. We can dare to speak truth to power. We can dare to be light, for as Jesus told us, we are the light of the world. The Feast of the Epiphany is coming on Tuesday, the celebration of the breaking of God's light into the world, the celebration of God's light in our lives. For the light, thanks be to God! Amen.