

Two thousand years ago, the eternal God entered the womb of a virgin, where his human body grew for 9 months. His mother, Mary, gave birth to the Son of God, who took the flesh and blood of man. That demands a response. And people respond to Christmas in all sorts of different ways. Some people love shopping for Christmas gifts while others detest the commercialism of Christmas. Some look forward to the holiday it provides and the chance to party and gather with family or friends. Others dread its arrival because it reminds them of loved ones no longer with them or of their dysfunctional family or the loneliness of having no family. Christians respond to the incarnation with worship - a special season of worship, Advent, when we celebrate the greatest event in history, the birth of Jesus Christ to be our Saviour. If people respond to Christmas in diverse ways now, it was even more the case at the time of the birth of Jesus. At his birth, angels sang, shepherds worshipped, and Mary pondered what everything meant. At the same time, a group of wise men embarked on a journey to find the newborn child. Sadly, there were far more troubling responses, as we shall see.

The Christmas carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are" has flaws that begin to appear even in the title. For a start, the magi were not kings, and Matthew never says that there were three of them. It is assumed that because they brought three gifts, there must have been three of them. Their entourage that travelled up to a thousand miles probably included soldiers and servants as well as a number of Magi. These Magi were wise men - not kings, but counsellors to kings. In the Old Testament, Daniel and his friends were magi - educated men, seeking the truth, trained to counsel and advise King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The magi who came to Jerusalem seem to have been learned, noble and wealthy. When they arrived, they explained their journey, saying, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2). One theory suggests that the star was an exploding supernova that slowly traversed the sky. The magi studied the heavens in a day when the boundary between astronomy and astrology was vague. The Bible forbids astrology. Isaiah mocks "stargazers who make predictions month by month" but cannot save themselves (Isaiah 47:13-15). Yet God reverses expectations and chooses to speak to stargazers through a star. Stars had significance for these men. God used a star to speak to them. To this day, God speaks in a language that gets the attention of people. Why would God want to speak to these pagans who served a pagan king? God seeks sinners. Christianity is not a religion for "good people" - it is for sinners who listen when God calls.

God called the magi and they travelled a great distance, following the star for long months. As wise men, they probably had some of the Old Testament, the words of prophets such as Daniel, to guide them. If they knew of Daniel, they knew that he had predicted the birth of a royal deliverer in Israel. Then they saw a mysterious star and followed it to Jerusalem. The arrival of their entourage was noticed and it quickly came to the attention of King Herod, especially considering their question, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" Imagine what a member of Herod's household who heard such a question would have thought. What could such a question mean? How was it that no one in Jerusalem, the capital city, knew of this royal birth?

1. Herod Responds to the Report of the Magi

When Herod heard that the wise men were seeking "the one who has been born king of the Jews", he saw this as a threat. He was greatly disturbed. He had been king of the Jews about 30 years by this time. He was old and died not long after Jesus' birth. Herod was a very gifted man, skilled as a soldier and in politics. He excelled at famine relief and building projects, but he became cruel and paranoid later in life and spared no effort to retain power. Perpetually fearing plots on his life, he even executed his wife Mariamne and three of his sons. His order to kill all the male babies of Bethlehem (2:16), in the hope of killing Jesus, is wholly consistent with history's portrait of Herod, a talented but violent and immoral ruler. Matthew says that when Herod became disturbed "all Jerusalem" became disturbed with him (2:3). Matthew is foreshadowing the future of Jesus, who arouses hostility and resentment, upheaval and suffering. So we understand

the lack of enthusiasm among the people. Anxiety and fear paralysed them, as they lived under the rule of the tyrant, Herod. Yet some of the people were awaiting a deliverer. They should not be indifferent to the magi's report. After all, their arrival seemed to fit the prophecies. For example, in his fourth oracle, Balaam had prophesied, "A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17). There was reason for the learned and even for attentive commoners to give full attention to the magi.

Herod called in two groups of experts to question them about the magi's report - the chief priests and the scribes (or teachers of the law). The scribes were conservative teachers of Scripture, bent on preserving traditional Jewish culture. The chief priests, on the other hand, were Sadducees who were willing to accommodate Roman authority and Greek culture to retain their wealth and power. Herod called these rivals together to discover "where the Christ was to be born". If these two groups should agree on the answer, it had to be true! In fact, they did answer together and, citing Micah 5:2, correctly replied, "In Bethlehem in Judea". They know where the prophecy is found and they know that the prophecy comes from God. Indeed they quote the prophecy to Herod: "But you, Bethlehem.....are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel" (2:6). Yet after the scribes and chief priests give their answer, we hear nothing more of them. They expected a deliverer, and here are reports that fit the prophecy. Yet, Matthew implies, they do nothing. They do not rejoice. They do not go to Bethlehem to worship this shepherd and ruler or even to investigate the report. They simply answer the king and go home. The apathy of the teachers of the law and chief priests is pathetic but all too typical. "Religious" people were and are often the last to receive Jesus. If the pagans in places like Tyre and Sidon or Sodom had seen Jesus' signs, if they had heard his preaching, Jesus says they would have repented (Matthew 11:20-24). But the religious people saw no need of repentance. It was true then and remains all too true today. Sometimes those who know the most about the faith in their minds know it least in their hearts.

Herod took the magi's message politically. The phrase "king of the Jews" sounded like a threat, like the announcement of a potential rival, and Herod determined to kill him. So Herod called the magi in to question them. He questioned them closely and repeatedly until he ascertained "the exact time the star had appeared" (2:7). Then he sent them on their way, asking them to report back "so that I too may go and worship him" (2:8). Confident that he had deceived the magi, Herod sent them off without an escort. The star reappeared and led them to the house in Bethlehem where the little family had by this time settled. The magi arrived and bowed in reverence. This doesn't mean that they knew everything about Jesus identity - that he is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. But they did bring honour and worship to this royal baby. Having bowed, they opened treasure boxes and brought out gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Some theologians explore the symbolic meaning of each gift to declare the deity of Christ and to foretell his death on the cross. Of course, it was God who led them to bring the gifts they brought, but these wise men from the east did not choose their gifts with Old Testament prophecies in mind. No, they brought them with their understanding of court life in mind. They knew that when a man meets a king, he brings gifts. Their gifts were costly and grand. For thousands and thousands of years, gold was the metal of kings, beautiful, rare and expensive. Frankincense and myrrh were valuable spices and perfumes. As a perfume, a bottle of myrrh could cost \$10,000 or more in today's terms. The magi simply brought Jesus the best gifts they could find. By custom, the king usually gave something back to his visitors (1 Kings 10:1-13). This royal family had nothing to give - at that time. Indeed, they may well have used these gifts to pay for their escape to and stay in Egypt when Herod sought to kill Jesus. But later, Jesus would have a gift to give to all who worship him.

2. The Response to Christ in Four Parts

The characters in Matthew's account represent the main types of response to Jesus to this day. The varied people who encounter Jesus in the pages of the gospel resemble people in all places, at all times.

Herod is an enemy of God, an agent of Satan, an antichrist in the strict sense of the word. When he tries to kill Jesus, he does Satanic work. Herod is a false king, trying to kill the true King, murdering whomever gets in his way. But God protects the Christ child. Herod's actions remind us that rebellion against God is irrational. It is folly to fight God, but sin makes people foolish.

Not many of us personally know people who, like Herod, hate God and would destroy Christ and his church, if possible. Indifference and ridicule are much more common in our society. But there are God-haters, atheists and persecutors who would wipe out Christianity if they could. The Bible never tells us to fight them, but we should expect them and stand firm in the faith, for we know that the Lord will overcome them.

Sadly, the hatred of Herod is only the first failed response. The people of Jerusalem were troubled by the word of Jesus' birth. Their question was "Could this somehow lead to our harm?" It is a sensible question. Herod was capable of killing at random, as too many dictators are. Still, we cannot live by fear. Even in the face of threats, the Bible says, "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened" (1 Peter 3:14). Fear must not govern our decisions. It is all too easy to let fear of disapproval or financial loss or relational strife govern our decisions, but we must let the truth guide us. This is what the people of Jerusalem missed. They asked, "What can go wrong?" They failed to ask, "What is my right response to this situation?"

The chief priests and teachers of the law also failed. They had expert knowledge, which they presented to others, yet they did not use that knowledge to direct themselves. They served Herod, quoting the Old Testament Scripture, but they did not rise to serve the Lord. They were satisfied to quote Scripture and go home. They should have joined the magi and hurried to Bethlehem. If we know the truth, we must act on it. People with knowledge and education are always tempted to rest content in that knowledge. But it is never enough to know the truth. If we truly know, we act. If we know who Jesus is, we worship him.

This is where the magi show the way. They know one thing, namely that the king of the Jews had been born. They travelled to see the baby king. They left work, home and family to follow a star for many months. They embarked on a perilous journey through alien lands. They brought the most expensive gifts they could find. When they arrived, they worshipped, then gave gifts. They knew little, but acted on what they did know. An expert in juvenile behaviour explained the difference between boys and girls in early high school years this way. Give a group of girls a task to perform and they will spend most of their time deciding who should do what. Give a group of boys a task and they will start doing something, anything, right away. After they run into their first serious obstacle, they stop to think. If that expert is right, we might say that the magi acted like a group of Year 8 boys. They didn't know much but they got to work. When they heard the king had been born, they moved at once, in costly devotion. And they brought costly gifts to Jesus, yet I imagine they took delight in it. They gave what was natural to them, what flowed from their lives - they gave gold and perfume from the royal court where they lived. Their action is an example for us. King David once said of his giving that he would not give the Lord that which "costs me nothing" (1Chronicles 21:24). We could add, "I will give that which causes me joy". Paul reminds us that God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). We should pray that we will be able to see what gift we can offer to the Lord. It should be our goal to give what is best of ourselves to the Lord, like the magi.

There is potential paradox here. When we give of ourselves, we often give what is delightful and natural and easy for us. But if we truly delight in it, we often work hard to make the gift an excellent one. A gifted cook or chef gives to others by preparing meals that are delicious and nutritious. An excellent cook may expend great effort to make a good meal great, by making it as pleasing to the eye as to the body. Like the magi, we should give what is natural, what is joyful, and what is costly to Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

In a way, when we give to Jesus it is a pure gift. The magi gave to the baby Jesus but he gave nothing back, at that moment. It can sometimes feel as though we give to the church or Christian causes and get nothing back either. But such a thought is shortsighted. Of course, Jesus doesn't return gifts in kind. No matter what the prosperity gospel preachers may say, Jesus does not give you back \$2 for every \$1 you give him. He gives something infinitely better - he gives himself. The gifts the magi gave Jesus probably helped preserve his life. They were probably used by Joseph and Mary to take the baby Jesus to Egypt. So the magi helped preserve Jesus' physical life. But Jesus gave them eternal life - sins forgiven, new life in relationship with God and the hope of heaven. He more than matched their gift.

He gives us the gift of eternal life, too. The gifts we offer in God's name resemble the gifts given within a joyful family. Children offer gifts to their mother and father to show how much they love them. Parents are always the prime givers. They do not need the gifts their children give, but they love the gifts because of the love they represent. May it be so for all of us, whatever gift we give the Lord. May we delight in giving what the Lord delights in receiving. The magi gave both themselves and their resources. That is what all followers of Jesus should do. Whether we worship, serve, evangelize, lead, pray, teach, do acts of mercy or give financially, our gifts cost us something. There is both sacrifice and pleasure in giving to the God who loves us and gave himself for us. Wise men and wise women still seek him. May our purpose and joy in life be to worship and adore and give to the Lord who has given us so much more in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen

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