

I kind of love it when people do Epiphany wrong. Superficially, the story of the wise men visiting Jesus with gifts and putting one over on Herod the Great is a fun fairy tale, and plenty of people are content to look no deeper. That may be why liturgical celebrations of the Epiphany came to be associated with public revelry, and even debauchery, that kicks off an entire carnival season. So long as no one gets hurt, I'm fine with that, and maybe we'll have an Epiphany party next year. I definitely want to recover the tradition of chalking the door of the church and offering blessed chalk, and even doing house blessings. But since, when I asked around, most people had never heard of celebrating Epiphany, it seemed best to keep things simple this year.

We should start by looking more closely at the story that inspired so many traditions. Many modern scholars dismiss the story as a fairy tale, or downplay it as dubious at best. While the Epiphany story is most important for the theological points it contributes to the Gospel, at the very least it also has historically accurate elements.

Our translation speaks of "wise men," but St. Matthew used one word, *magoi*, often Anglicized to magi. The word originally meant a specific educated class of astrologer-priests in Persia, but by Matthew's time had come to mean any educated person. By specifying *magoi* "from the East," Matthew might be indicating that he intends the original meaning of the word.

The renown of Persian astrologers, the belief that major events on Earth were accompanied by astronomical events, and the specific belief that a king's birth would be indicated by a rising star, are accurate to the historical period. Traveling long distances to pay homage to a new king with the finest possible gifts wasn't exotic, but perfectly normal. The only thing unusual is the humble location.

The particular gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh have been interpreted as symbolizing Jesus's royalty, divinity, and humanity, but Matthew doesn't dwell on them, and they also were simply the sort of precious gifts that would be appropriate to offer a new king. Herod's duplicity, paranoia, and penchant for violence are likewise consistent with depictions of him both elsewhere in scripture and in secular sources. So it seems likely to me that St. Matthew believed the story was historical, though it also connects with several themes he emphasizes in his Gospel.

The most important theme of any gospel is simply its portrayal of who Jesus is. The Epiphany story is sometimes associated with the idea of three kings, but the *magoi*, while elite, were not royalty. But this story could very accurately be called a story of two kings. The kindest thing I can say about Herod's character is that he is a foil for Jesus. Herod's paranoia and ready recourse to violence highlight the confidence and

peacefulness of Jesus and his family. Herod's public and private extravagance throw the humble simplicity of the Holy Family into relief. Herod's superficial observance of Jewish law and tradition contrast with the authentic devotion of Jesus and his family, as I mentioned last Sunday. And perhaps most important for Matthew's purposes, Herod's lies highlight Jesus's inherent truth.

Herod claimed to be a king, and he could get away with calling himself one... because the Romans allowed him to. He was what's known as a "client king," really just a convenient vassal of, or chief collaborator with, a distant imperial power that held all the real political power. The Roman emperor gave Herod his orders and so long as the taxes rolled in and the people didn't revolt, allowed him to do as he pleased.

Maybe that's why Herod was so threatened by a star and people following it. A star was, and is, a symbol of sovereignty. Stars appear to be fixed in place, influencing but never influenced, untouchable by any earthly power. By casually announcing they were seeking a king announced by a star, the *magoi* had doubly reminded Herod of his true place in the world.

Just as Herod knew, deep down, that he wasn't that great, and the *magoi* reinforced that at the beginning of Jesus's earthly life, so too would the Romans themselves recognize Jesus's authentic kingship at his crucifixion, with the sign famously proclaiming, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." This is ordinarily portrayed as irony and mockery, and only an inadvertent acknowledgement of Jesus's royalty, but maybe not.

I recently learned that although he is commonly referred to as a "king," Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who shows up during Jesus's passion, never actually held that title. None of Herod's sons did. The Roman emperor called them "ethnarchs," instead. At the time that Pilate had that sign made, no one else was even claiming the title, "King of the Jews." So Pilate might have been sincere. After all, when someone suggested that Pilate should have written, "this man said, 'I am the king of the Jews,'" Pilate replied, "What I have written, I have written."

But St. Matthew is making an even bigger point. Jesus's true royalty is revealed to foreigners, pagans, who represent all foreign people. Yes, Jesus is a — or really, the — Jewish king, but he is also a king for all nations, whether they know God or not, because God loves all humanity, no matter what. And praise God for that. Rather than a selfish ruler like Herod, in Jesus God has sent the world a perfect gift, far more precious than any material possession, a king who stands within the Jewish tradition of ideal kingship entailing peaceful care for the poor, needy, and oppressed, as tonight's Psalm

so beautifully expresses.

Ordinarily I'm not persuaded when people say that I should do something just because a lot of other people are already doing it, but when even foreigners and enemies are proclaiming Jesus as king, it seems obvious that we should do nothing less. And we must consider how we express our recognition, how we respond to the realization of what God has done. While some churches reenact the Epiphany story, and maybe we'll do that next year too, I'm more interested in how we can pay homage to Jesus for real. There is no longer a physical home for the Holy Family to which a star could lead us. Even if there were, while they graciously accepted them, Jesus never asked for expensive gifts.

We can give him something more precious, though also more flawed, the only thing our true king really wants. We can give Jesus ourselves. That is, although we are not royalty, we can devote ourselves more faithfully to worship and prayer and above all, we can share with Jesus in caring for the poor, needy, and oppressed. Giving ourselves to Jesus inevitably means traveling a different road through life, and a better one. Much as I enjoy revelry, and sometimes even debauchery, I know we all will find greater and more lasting joy in a life of charity and justice than even the best party could give us. Traveling together on the Christian way, God's gifts of peace and joy are ours to receive. Thanks be to God.