

**Wednesday January 10, 2007**

**A Reading from St Matthew (2:1-12)**

And after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold Magoi from the east happened upon the scene in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the one born King of the Judeans? For we saw his star in the east and we came to kneel to him.”

And after hearing it, King Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him, and after assembling all the high priests and the scribes of the people, he was inquiring of them about where the Christ was (to be) born.

And they told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for in this manner it has been written through the prophet, ‘And you Bethlehem (in the) land (of) Judah, *by no means* least of the leaders of Judah; for from you shall come forth a leader, one who shall lead as a shepherd my people of Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly, after calling the Magoi, inquired about the exact time the star was caused to appear, and after sending them into Bethlehem he said, “After going, find out the details concerning the child, and when you should find him report to me, in order that even I, after coming, might kneel to him.”

And after listening to the king they set out and behold, the star, the one they saw in the east, was leading them forward until it came and stood above where the child was. After beholding the star they rejoiced very much with great joy. And after going into the house they beheld the child with Mary his mother, and after falling to their knees they knelt to him, and after opening their treasures they brought forth for him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And after being warned through a dream not to return to Herod, through a different way they went up-country into their country.

**The Word of the Lord**

## Homily by Rev Timothy A Leitzke

The child has been born and the world is forever different. That's true of any child. Jesus meant new responsibilities for Mary and Joseph. That little baby needed to be fed, and washed, and kept warm. That little baby could cry and bring Mary and Joseph and whatever they were doing to a stop. A baby is a constant reminder of God at work, not only in new life but in something small and helpless nonetheless having great power.

Jesus' power exceeds that of your average baby. St Matthew tells the story that certain *Magoi* came from the east. No one knows what he meant. These *Magoi*, or Magi, could have been sorcerers. Their name fits a certain group of priests of Zoroaster, the God worshipped in Persia—indeed, some early Christian artwork depicts the *Magoi* in Persian clothing. Others suggest that they were astrologers; why else would they be following stars? Whatever Matthew meant, they (and nowhere does Matthew say that there were three of them) came to Jerusalem and told Herod they were looking for the King of the Judeans. After hearing this, Herod trembled and all Jerusalem with him. Little Jesus shakes the whole city! Why?

Jerusalem shakes because Herod and all of his cronies know that the jig is up. They've been caught. It's like the

scene in the Robin Hood story when King Richard arrives on the scene, and Prince John and the Sherriff of Nottingham know they've been busted. Herod's actions betray his guilt. If he didn't know he was caught why would he be so nervous? He'd just tell these *Magoi* that they were obviously confused. Instead, he shakes, and he calls for his shaky religious authorities, and he asks them, "Where is the Christ to be born?" That's the question that clinches the guilty verdict. Who said anything about the Christ? These guys are here looking for a king, and Herod asks about the Christ, because he knows, deep down in his very core, that this King of the Judeans is someone God sent. Herod's time is up.

Some of you know that I'm a bit of an apologist for Herod the Great. The Bible doesn't give him a fair shake, but then Herod made a lot of enemies. He wasn't a Judean, but an Idumean: ethnically and religiously close to but not the same as a Judean. He was a goon, who married into the high priest's family, then assassinated his in-laws and his wife. The Romans loved him. He was a real Law and Order man. Herod abused authority, gladly hopped in bed with the hated Romans, murdered almost everyone close to him, and then died of a blend of sexually transmitted diseases. So, yeah, his legitimacy is questionable. He's the perfect fit for this story because legitimacy and authority are at its heart.

Herod and all of Jerusalem with him represent illegitimate, abusive authority. The baby Jesus is legitimate, divine authority. The *Magoi* represent the authority of the nations. They're gentiles, non-Jews, come to do obeisance to a new king. When a person is elected President, world leaders offer congratulations. The world (except for Herod) accepts God's son as a king, and has come to congratulate him.

The symbolism doesn't stop there. Some have said that the three gifts represent three aspects of Jesus' life. The kingship, acknowledged by the *Magoi*, is honored with gold. Jesus' priesthood is honored with incense. (A priest's job was to sacrifice animals and burn them. You'd burn a lot of incense at work if that was your job.) Jesus' death is honored with myrrh, a fluid used for embalming. Even as an infant his place as a crucified Christ is set.

What strikes me the most in this story is how the *Magoi* get home. We all know the story that God warned them in a dream to go a different way. That word "warned" comes from the word *χρηματισθεντες*, a whopper of a Greek word that used to mean "do business with". Translate archaically, it means that after God did business with the *Magoi* through a dream, they went upcountry through a different way.

Throughout this story of authority, legitimate versus illegitimate, God is doing God's business. There's an old way of doing business, that's done through the prophets. This way of business is still valid. The scribes can consult the prophets to discern where the Christ is to be born. God has some other ways of doing business, and here, with God's King of the Judeans on the line, God does business directly through dreams, telling Joseph to marry Mary, telling the *Magoi* to go home by a different way, and later telling Joseph to run away to Egypt.

This is, to me, the best news in this story: the good news is that God's business is getting done. The people resorting to prophecy in this story are the bad guys. They're using the prophets to try to defeat God. God had given them the Christ, and they honestly think that they can go kill the Christ and defeat God. How arrogant to assume that we can use scripture to defeat God! God's business is going to get done. If we try to outguess God, God will just holler at someone through a dream and do what needs to be done. There's a sense of helplessness, knowing that you cannot outdo God, but there's a greater sense of relief. God's will must prevail. God's love and grace will win. God's business will be done. Amen