

In the name of **†** Jesus.

In our Gospel today, Matthew continues with the infancy part of his gospel. The focus in chapter 1 is on Joseph's actions — remember, I preached at the end of Advent that Matthew seems to be offering an explanation for why Joseph did not beget Jesus, but that He was born of Mary alone. We just heard again this Christmas the reason: because "*that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*" (Matt. 1:20). Thus Joseph did receive Mary as wife; thus Joseph did not know her, at least, up until the time she had given birth; thus, Joseph called Mary's son "Jesus." It was all about Joseph's relationship to Mary and Jesus, and about the coming of Immanuel by a virgin mother. That Mary gave birth to a son was relegated away in a subordinate clause.

Matthew then turns in chapter 2 to the marvelous story of the coming of the magi (also called wise men) to see the one “*born king of the Jews.*” And it is marvelous, for the story is filled with miracles and prophecy, political intrigue and a city in turmoil, a covert plot to kill the infant King and, as we heard last Sunday, the holy family’s hurried escape from the murderous Herod’s massacre of the Holy Innocents.

In the category of miracles and prophecy, surely, is the appearance of the star, rising in the east. Some point to the prophecy in Numbers for this appearance: “*a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel*”; perhaps, but it sounds to me more like a prophecy of the coming of Christ Himself, the scepter, a figure of speech for Christ the King, and the star referring to the Word in whom was life, “*the light of men*,” the inextinguishable light shining in the darkness (John 1:4-5). Some point to Isaiah, our Old Testament text: “*nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising*.” Certainly the magi followed the light of the Epiphany star, but this star led them to a fairer and brighter star, Jesus, “*the bright morning star*” (Rev. 22:16), of whom we just sang.

The star surely was miraculous. Some people want to argue away miracles in the Bible, giving them natural explanations. It was a comet; it was a convergence of planets; etc. But such explanations can't explain the "erratic, yet precise movement" of this star. It's unlikely "that a first-century reader of Matthew would have regarded the 'star' as a natural phenomenon," writes one commentator (Allison quoted in Jeffrey Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1–11:1*, p. 116). Another writes: "It seems likely that Matthew regarded the star of the Magi as a miraculous event, and hence so should we" (Gibbs, p. 116).

Also, in the category of prophecy is the recitation of Micah's prophecy. The magi came to Jerusalem to worship the king of the Jews, but He wasn't there in the king's palace, and Herod didn't know where to find Him. Herod inquired of the

chief priests and scribes for the answer — they found it in the pages of Holy Scripture: the king would be born in Bethlehem. “[Y]ou, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, ... from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

In the category of political intrigue was the unexpected appearance of these magi — “*behold*,” Matthew wrote of their appearance. The question they posed to King Herod upset him: “*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*” Herod’s disquiet was understandable, for Herod was but a client king, placed on the throne by the Romans. Therefore, One who is truly born king of the Jews would be a definite threat to his rule. He plotted Jesus’ demise so that he could stay in power.

The magi, on the other hand, were guileless in all of this intrigue. They had no reason to keep their search for this king a secret and, apparently, they didn’t. All of Jerusalem also heard of the coming of these visitors and of their quest, and Matthew says they too were troubled. I doubt, however, that their upset was like Herod’s. More likely, they were stirred up with excitement at the possibility of a new and, hopefully, just king.

For the Jews knew that Herod was not just; he was known for his ruthlessness. We know of his slaughter of the Holy Innocents. More than that, he had his wife, her mother, and three of his sons executed. In fact, so ruthless was Herod that Roman historian Josephus reported that as he neared death, he worried that he would die “without being lamented, and without such mourning as men usually expect at a King’s death.” So, he called all the principal men of the Jewish nation to him, held them in the hippodrome until he died. Whereupon, he had them slaughtered, so that Herod would “have the honour of a memorable mourning at his funeral” (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XVII, Chapter 6, 5; penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-17.html).

Thus, Matthew describes the political scheming of Herod; our modern political operatives have nothing on him. After Herod had found out about Bethlehem as the birthplace of this newborn king, he plied the magi for more information about the star, and then sent them on their way, only requesting that they report back to him so that he also could go and “*worship him*” — Herod’s later actions show his lying deception. He wanted not to worship this young king, but to destroy Him. As we heard last Sunday, by divine intervention, the Holy Family avoided Herod’s murderous rampage. They escaped to Egypt and lived there until Herod had died.

The magi were directed to go to Bethlehem to find King Jesus, and the Epiphany star reappeared to lead them to the exact house of the child Jesus. There, we know well, they knelt before Him and worshiped Him and offered him gifts fit

for a king: gold, incense, and myrrh, even as Isaiah prophesied: “*They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.*”

Preachers have offered varying symbolic interpretations for these gifts. Do they represent Christ’s “royalty, deity, and sacrificial death”? Do they show that these Gentiles were offering “knowledge and obedience and love” to the infant King? Do the gifts stand for “wisdom, prayer, and the mortification of the flesh” (Gibbs, footnote, 126)? Something else? Matthew doesn’t provide the answer.

What is sure is that Gentiles are welcomed by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and they show their obeisance to the king, in fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah. For we read earlier that “*nations shall come to your light,*” and perhaps that’s best, but the King James translates the Hebrew נָגָן or the LXX’s ἔθνη as Gentiles. That’s the way we heard Tyler sing it on Christmas Eve — “And the Gentiles shall come to thy light.”

We marvel at this, too, and rejoice at the Epiphany’s surprising good news for us, after all, as St. Paul intimates: “Who could expect it?” This “*mystery of Christ ... was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*” But having had Paul reveal this mystery to us, we can look back on the prophecies, understand them, and rejoice in them. We do now know and rejoice in the “*mystery [of Christ, which] is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*”

The coming of the Gentile magi to Jesus is also a physical manifestation of the fulfillment of the angel’s proclamation to the shepherds: “*behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people*” (Luke 2:10). Jesus came not just to be “*king of the Jews,*” but “*King of kings, and Lord of lords*” (Rev. 19:16), for which we all today with the magi share in this good news and sing the praises of our Lord. “*The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever*” (Rev. 11:15, alt.).

What marvelous good news for us Gentiles, to which we respond, joining our voices to those of the heavenly throng, singing “*Hallelujah*” (Rev. 19:6).

In the name of the Father and of the ♣ Son and of the Holy Spirit.