

Characters at the Crèche: The Magi

Matthew 2: 1-12

Epiphany of the Lord/ 6th January 2008

In Dickens' (1812-1870) *A Christmas Carol* [1843], old Jacob Marley says to Scrooge on the night of his visitation, "At this time of the rolling year, I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted *me!*" The sight of Jacob Marley is a fitting image when approaching this text, for it is burdened by a "ponderous chain" which we have forged "link by link, and yard by yard;"¹ it's the ponderous chain of tradition linked to tradition that encumbers this text, making it almost impossible to bear. Buried somewhere at the bottom is the real story of the star and the identity of these foreigners with gifts and why Matthew includes it as integral to the good news of Jesus.

So let's unlink the chain, perhaps releasing the story from the tradition. Who are these guys? Let's just call them *guests* for the moment. As we know, the text doesn't say there were three. Some Eastern traditions claim there were twelve or thirteen. By the fifth century the number is fixed at three and they're given names – Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. By the sixth century they took on symbolic meaning, representing three ages – youth, middle age, and old age. Around the same time, through a reading of Isaiah 60, "the wealth of the nations shall come to you," (Is. 60: 5), the three came to represent the races of the known world: Europe, Africa, and Asia.

In the 4th century, the Spanish poet Prudentius (348-405/413) identified the three as "kings," although Matthew never gives them that title. His poem would evolve through the Middle Ages and eventually become our carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are." In a text from the twelfth century, the biography of the bishop of Milan, St. Eustorgius, who died in 350 AD, tells how Emperor Constantine's mother, Helen (c.250 – c.330), discovered the tombs of the three guests in the East.² She had their bodies transferred to the Church of St. Sofia in Constantinople. When Eustorgius became bishop of Milan, the Emperor authorized the remains to be transferred there. And there they remained until their journey continued – these guys are always on the move, they can't seem to rest anywhere (!) – when Frederick Barbarossa (1122-1190), the Holy

¹ Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books: Volume I - A Christmas Carol/ The Chimes* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 61.

² The twelfth century text is the *Vita Eustorgii*.

Roman Emperor, moved them to Cologne, Germany, in 1164. Today their remains are in a golden shrine in the massive cathedral in Cologne. Well, at least *someone's* remains have been moved all over the place for centuries.

I say “someone’s” because Marco Polo (1254-1324) tells us in his journey across modern-day Iran in 1270s, he was shown three tombs, one for each of the guests³ – who were not kings, according to Matthew, and not really wise men either (as most Bibles tell us), but *magoi*, plural of *magos*, a Greek derivative of a very old Persian word *Magupati*, which refers to one thing: the priestly caste within Zoroastrianism – one of the oldest religions of the ancient world, influencing both Greek and Roman philosophy, bridging the religions of the East and West, and still practiced today in Iran and India.⁴ They paid close attention to the stars; they were early astronomers. The Magi were the scientists of their day, even advancing the field of mathematics. They were also astrologers, which explains why the term *magi* has been applied to the occult in general and, in English, the root of our word magic. Think: Harry Potter. In order to avoid any reference to magic, the King James Version called them “wise men.”

And what about those gifts? So many different theories. Gold, frankincense, myrrh – gifts fit for a king, a prophet, and a priest? Were they tools of the *Magoi* trade that the Magi now give up because they have found the knowledge of the universe in the face of Jesus? But what would a poor craftsman family do with these exotic gifts any way? The English deist, Thomas Woolston (1668-1733) once quipped, “If they had brought sugar, soap, and candles they would have acted like wise men.” The gifts were probably pawned in order to afford the exorbitantly expensive trip to Egypt. There’s no mention of them anywhere else in scripture. Although, there are monks in the monastery of St. Paul on Mount Athos in Greece who have a gold case they claim contain all three of the gifts.

In Matthew’s version the Magi were not present on the night Jesus was born. They arrived at a *house* (not a manger), to see a *child* (not an infant). But when they do see him, Matthew tells us, “They knelt down and paid him homage.” It’s easy to overlook this description – of course that’s what they would do. The Greek here means to kneel, but also to fall prostrate, with your face to the ground in deference. In the

³ Marco Polo, *The Book of the Million*, Book 1. “In Persia is the city of Saba, from which the Three Magi set out and in this city they are buried, in three very large and beautiful monuments, side by side. Above them there is a square building, beautifully kept. The bodies are still entire, with hair and beard remaining.”

⁴ The religion of Zoroaster emerges in the 9th/10th century BC. It enters recorded history in the mid-5th century BC, through the Greek historian Herodotus’ (c.484-c.425 BC) *The Histories* (completed c. 440 BC), known as “the Father of History.”

Persian world, this was a gesture of utmost respect and honor. But in the Roman and Jewish world, kneeling and prostration were considered undignified. However, it was reserved in the Jewish tradition for only one thing, for *epiphanies* – for revelation, a manifestation of the Holy, for the appearance of God: an *epiphany* so incredible, so amazing that the wisest of the world, the scientists of his age, knelt before the knowledge of God revealed in his birth. Matthew tells us that this was an *epiphany* so astonishing, so astounding for Matthew that even Gentiles, foreigners, people unlike him, could recognize in Jesus' birth the dawning of a new day for all the nations of the world. A new light breaks forth, not from a star, but from his luminous face – so that in his light we see light and in his truth find freedom. His light leads us through a threshold into a new day, a new way to live and to die, a new way to embrace God and be embraced by God, a new way that prevents us from going back to the old ways, a new way that never quite leaves us feeling, thinking, or believing the same way. Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) once said, “Having come to know Jesus we are forbidden to return by the way we came.”

When the Magi knelt before Jesus one journey came to an end. But they didn't stay there. When they got up on their feet a new journey began, going home by another road. Jesus' birth attracts us, calls us to journey toward him; but there's also a journey *from* him, that he sends us on, into new possibilities, new adventures, through new thresholds of faithful risk and service that we would probably never venture toward except for having encountered him. *That's what epiphanies do – they change everything and send through new thresholds, down different roads.*

There's a custom in some European countries that on Epiphany people (sometimes children) go from door to door and write with chalk over the threshold of a house: C+M+B and then the year. They stand for: *Christus mansionem benedicat*. The letters are also the initials of the Magi – Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar. *Christus mansionem benedicat* – Christ bless this house.

As the light of Christ sends us through the threshold into a New Year – may our homes and *this* household of faith know in new ways the blessings of Christ in 2008. We will be embarking upon new adventures as a church this year where we will be asked to take faithful risks, go in new directions, down new roads, and asked to continue the journey of the Spirit who longs to take us where we need to go. That's what epiphanies do.

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