

"God for All People"

In today's Holy Gospel from Matthew chapter 2 there is a group of men who are described as "Wise men." They have been called Wise Men, Magi, or Three Kings. Matthew 2:1 says, *"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, '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.'"* You need to understand that it was sometime after the birth of Christ that these "wise men" entered Jerusalem – all because they were following the star. It is also important to understand the proximity of Bethlehem to Jerusalem. It is less than 6 miles to the Southeast of Jerusalem. I for one was shocked in 1999 when we got on the bus in Jerusalem and were told that we were going to Bethlehem. I thought it would be a long ride, but we were there in 5 minutes. It opened up a whole new understanding of the connection.

The term Magi – comes from the Greek word μάγος "*magos*" which means *a Magian, or an astrologer, a magician*; this would mean some wise men who were specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural science. The King James Version refers to the Magi as "Wise Men" probably to detract from what they knew as a magician or follower of the occult.

We often hear of "The Three Wise Men", as a matter of fact, we sang "We Three Kings of Orient Are" even though we actually have no evidence to support how many there were! They offered three wonderful gifts - but there could have been any number of wise men – and no one really knows for sure! Some believe that they were a group of astronomers from the Mesopotamia area. Their names cannot be found anywhere in the Scriptures, but western religious tradition says that they are Melchior - a Persian scholar; Caspar – an Indian scholar; and Balthazar – an Arabian scholar. These foreign noblemen, followed the custom of visiting the King of the region, and so they went and saw Herod, and sought information concerning another King – *'The King of the Jews.'* You know, that must have really insulted Herod – because it was the Romans who had appointed him as king of the Jews.

When these men got to meet the Lord Jesus, they did not find *"the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes."* In this Gospel, Jesus is referred to as *"the child."* *"After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was."* (Matthew 2:9) These visitors from the East were led miraculously to the very place where the young Jesus was. *"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."* (Matthew 2:11) They did not go to a stable – but to a house.

There is also more evidence about the length of time that passed from Jesus' birth, found in Herod's attempt to destroy this child. Herod had all male children, in Bethlehem, who were under 2 years old slaughtered. I still cannot get used to that. Matthew 2:16-18 clearly states, *"When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave*

orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." Rachel was one of the wives of Jacob – and her tomb is in Bethlehem.

Herod was a vicious King, consumed with destroying all of these children. *"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, 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.' "* Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. *He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."* (Matthew 2:3-8) What absolute deceit – he did not want to go and worship the Lord – but instead he wanted to annihilate Him! He did not want anyone to take his job from him!

For all of the historical good that Herod did in his refinishing the Temple and the many projects like building Masada and other fortresses – this was a real madman! He wanted to know where the King was born as foretold in God's Word - Micah 5:2 *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* How can a baby be from "ancient time?" Only God can do that – only God can BE that! Isn't it interesting that the Jewish leaders knew the prophecies but they dared not go and see for themselves? Instead we have a group of Gentile dignitaries who were willing to cross a desert, to follow a star, offering gifts, and offering worship as well! After consulting with the scribes and Chief Priests, Herod sent these visitors from the east to Bethlehem to search diligently for the child. Herod pretends that he desires to worship the King of the Jews as well.

The "Wise men" go on to visit the Savior: *"After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was."* *"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."* *"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."* *"And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."* (Matthew 2:9-12)

God leads these men with this star - directly to where Jesus is. They fell down before the Lord and they worshipped Him, and offered Him - Gold, incense, and Myrrh. After a time of worshipping Him, God warns these men of Herod's plan to destroy the Christ child, to destroy Jesus and as a result the family and the magi depart another way – and the family fled to Egypt as they were shown in a dream. God was trying to show these men something special and they were blessed to observe the Savior firsthand – and the whole world needs a savior! Today God

Feast of the Epiphany – January 3, 2021, Year B

is doing the very same thing. God wants all people to see His son for who He is - the Savior of the world! God opened their eyes and He opened their hearts! These men fell down when they saw Jesus and they worshipped Him.

Unfortunately, let's face it, today there are many who see God at work all around them and really know that it is God who is working, but they are indifferent and they just do not care – because they are so wrapped up in themselves. And then there are many who really do believe that Jesus is Savior and the only way to heaven, but they refuse to open their hearts! And then there are those who completely deny that Jesus is the only way and bend to political correctness, not wanting to offend their friends who think otherwise. The truth is that Jesus is the “the way, the truth and the life” and we will not be manipulated to think otherwise. How absolutely tragic that people cannot open their hearts and understand who Jesus Christ really is – and what He brings! It is our job to pray for those who do not think Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, or they think that Jesus is something else entirely. We need pray for their hearts to be transformed; and for the Holy Spirit to reveal Himself to them and change their minds, their hearts, and their lives forever.

Something else happened with these visitors from the East - they opened their treasures and presented them to Jesus: gold, and incense, and myrrh. What a picture of humility in these men - “*they fell down, and worshipped him*” These men humbly bowed and offered valuable, precious gifts to a young child and Jesus was worthy to receive these gifts. They gave Him gold for He is the King of Kings. They gave Him incense, often referred to as frankincense which represented Him being the High Priest of High Priests. And then, they gave Him myrrh, which represented the extreme sacrifice that Jesus would make on our behalf, as a remarkable act of love, dying on the cross – taking our punishment on Himself. All three were expensive gifts that they gave to this young King, willingly, humbly, gratefully as an act of faith!

They obediently followed a light in the sky not knowing how long the journey was going to be; with no idea what they would encounter along the way, unsure of what they would find when they reached their destination. These men faithfully followed God, relying on Him, and that is exactly what we need to do - rely on God! We need to be following a God given direction; not knowing how long our journey will be; not knowing what we will encounter along the way; but we need to trust God! Like these wise men and Mary and Joseph, we must, as a church and as a people of God - listen to the direction God has given us. We need to open that Book that God has given us called Holy Scriptures. It has everything we need. It is our job follow him! We must be like these incredibly wise men and listen, trust, and obey Him!