

Year A
The Feast of the Epiphany
Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning we are focusing on another aspect of the familiar story of Jesus's birth—the coming of the wise men, the Magi, “to pay him homage.” There is so much written about these men, and about the star, and what the star might have been. Was it a comet? A conjunction of planets? We really don't know. We don't even know how many wise men there were—you notice that Matthew doesn't say—but tradition says there were three, because they gave the three gifts. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. However, the greatest gift they gave the infant Jesus was their *worship*. They came to pay him homage.

In this passage, the word translated as homage is *proskyneo*, which was the word Greeks used to describe their posture when they laid themselves face-down on the ground before a god, or a king. We would say they prostrated themselves, but *proskyneo* implies not just a posture, but also giving oneself utterly to that being. The wise men, the Magi were probably Babylonian astrologers, tell King Herod that they were taking this long, dangerous journey, in order that they might give themselves utterly to this other king, this “King of the Jews,” whose miraculous star they were following.

No surprise then, that Herod is “frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” at this news. This is the Messiah that the Magi are talking about—these foreigners know that the Messiah has been born, but not exactly where. These gentile scholars of the stars feel compelled to leave their country at the sighting of the miraculous star, and the news that a mighty king has been born. A power that could inspire this kind of devotion could be incredibly dangerous to Herod's oppressive regime. And Herod,

being a wily and ruthless tyrant, wants to put a stop to anything that would endanger his power, even if it's the fulfillment of a prophecy that is supposed to bring peace to the entire world. So Herod makes the wise men believe that he, also wants to "go and pay him homage." This is the second time this word *proskyneo* appears in the passage.

And there is deep irony in the use of that word here, because Herod should do exactly this. He *should* prostrate himself before this newborn king, shouldn't he? If the baby that the star is announcing is the Messiah, he is God's anointed, he is the King of all kings, the bringer of justice and peace. This despicable despot *needs* to give himself to this child who is grace incarnate, but Herod has no intention of doing this, and we as the hearers of this story know it. Herod then meets secretly with the Magi—secretly because he doesn't want a delegation of his pharisees and priests and scribes to form up as an entourage to the wise men. The last thing he needs is for his own people to get excited about the star, and the baby king. Herod secretly sends the wise men away.

So the Magi go to Bethlehem, as we know, and the star stops over the house where Jesus was (by this time they seem to be out of the stable), and Matthew says that "when they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Their long, arduous journey has been rewarded, and they are ecstatic that they are finally going to see this king. When they go in, they "saw the child with Mary, his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage." This is the third time *proskyneo* is used in the passage. The first thing they do is to prostrate themselves before Jesus. They give themselves utterly to him, abasing themselves entirely to a baby. Their worship is the first gift that they give to Jesus: the gift of themselves. Matthew wants us to see that this baby is divine.

Then they give the traditional gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but because they gave their homage first, it's clear that they consider Jesus to be above them. If they considered themselves to be equal to him, they would have given their gifts to him immediately, and standing, and there would have been no worship, no homage. And of course, they give rich gifts. Gold is self-evidently valuable, even today, but it also stands for his royalty. The frankincense was a very expensive incense used in worship, but it stands for Jesus's role as divine. And myrrh was an expensive resin used for embalming the dead, prefiguring Jesus's death on the cross.

And of course, God sends the Magi a dream to keep them from returning to Herod with the news of Jesus' whereabouts. Instead, they "left for their own country by another road." They have given their gift of worship, and seen the holy king. The Feast of Epiphany is about many things, one of which is seeing that God came into the world for everyone. Not to save only the Jews, as God's chosen people, but also to save the gentiles—to save us. Matthew makes it clear that God wanted these men whom the Jews would have considered heathens, to know about Jesus, and to have the opportunity to give themselves to him. To make him their king, in every way.

Today, and in the weeks to come, how can you celebrate Epiphany? What gifts do you have? How can you offer them to Jesus? As we move through the season of Epiphany, let's think and pray about this. Amen.

The Rev. Melanie Lewis
Rector
Christ Church Millwood