

Matthew 2:1-6

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel'" (NRSV).

Merry Christmas! It is so wonderful to celebrate the mass of Christ. Today I'll talk about some of the first people to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The first were the shepherds, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. They glorified and praised God, which is what we should do. The second were the wise men, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. They went looking for the new born king in order to pay their respects. We all love these beautiful stories about the birth of Jesus. They are rich in meaning and give us a warm and fuzzy feeling that nurtures us spiritually and fills us with love.

The Gospel of Matthew, like the other gospels, makes a strong effort to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and the Son of God. From the start Matthew makes a proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah. He does not just state his claim. In order to validate his claim; he gives a story about the action of others. Their action tells a lot about who they are and who he is.

You know the story very well. It took place after the birth of Jesus. Wise men called magi came from the East and went to Jerusalem looking for the child born king of the Jews. When they arrived they asked "Where is the child?" They followed some kind of astrological phenomena for a specific purpose - to pay him homage. King Herod is frightened by this and has to call in the religious leaders to find out where the Messiah was to be born. The religious leaders are familiar with the prophecy and tell him in Bethlehem of Judea.

It is easy to look at the story and say "OK, here is the New Testament story and here is the Old Testament prophecy. See how they match. It is a beautiful Christmas story about the wise men ask who ask 'Where is the child?'" But it is not just a story. This story is not just any other story. It is not just a beautiful Christmas story. This is a story that is rich in meaning.

The wise men came from the east. This means that it is Gentiles that came looking for Jesus. This is very significant. For gentiles to be looking for Jesus shows us that the God of Abraham is not something that is reserved only for the Hebrews. They cannot keep God contained in their borders, or keep God solely for themselves. God is for everyone. This also shows us that people outside of Israel knew about the coming Messiah. They were not only expecting him but they also knew him to be the king of the Jews. This is in direct contrast to Rome's existing puppet king. They are called wise men because they had wisdom. They recognized the astrological phenomena as a sign from God and they were willing to take action. They did not just marvel at the phenomena, they saw it, recognized it, and embarked on a long journey to go and see, to be a witness, and to pay homage.

From Matthew's story we see the personality of Herod. He is purely selfish. His fear shows his selfishness. He does not want to honor the new king or celebrate the birth. He is afraid

the new king of the Jews is born because he is afraid of losing his position of power. He is a puppet king for Rome; he is only there for power. Herod has a disregard for the religion. He does not know the scriptures and is ignorant of the prophecy. He does not care that this is the will of God. It does not matter to him that this is an act of God. His only concern is his position of power.

The religious leaders know the scriptures. They know the specific prophecy. You can see for yourself, you have the same word, **Micah 5:2** But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel (NRSV). Matthew does not just say "This is the Messiah and here is the Old Testament proof." Matthew shows us that the religious leaders knew from the beginning that this sign is from God and it is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. In spite of knowing this they failed to respond. The religious leaders do not go looking for the new born king of the Jews even though they knew the prophecy and even though they now know about the astrological phenomena. They did not go a short distance even though they see others looking for Jesus that traveled a long distance. They should have gone with the magi but they had an attitude of indifference.

The birth narrative of Matthew is a synopsis for the life of Jesus here on earth. He is rejected by the Jews but accepted by the Gentiles. It is those with wisdom that seek out Jesus while those in positions of power are afraid of him. The religious leaders remain oblivious in spite of signs from God, all of the evidence, and all of the excitement going on around them.