

January 2, 2011

Ministry to Magi – Ministry through Magi

“Behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” Matthew 2:1

The spy movie genre demands the international cocktail scene. Whether the hero is Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sean Connery or Pierce Bronson, he must go through the crowd of international visitors with ease and grace speaking Arabic to white robed sheiks from the desert. He recognizes foreign insignia of all uniforms and addresses a Turkish colonel correctly by his rank. He kisses on the cheek those whose culture calls for greetings with kisses on the cheek. He firmly shakes the hand and gives eye to eye contact for some while shifting his gaze downwardly, reverently and in expressions of humility for others. In thirty seconds He walks out the front door a charmed man.

We admire such characters because real life people cannot pull off such an act. Royalty and diplomats spend a lifetime learning language and especially culture to fit in and communicate with the peoples of the world. To help them courts and embassies have protocol courtiers. In the science fiction world, Princess Lea has her protocol droid. Still, many an international incident is created or opportunities for peace evaporate when they fail. The man from the East calls the man from the West “colonialist”. The man from the West feels slighted and calls the man from the East barbarian.

Despite all the education in protocol, culture and language we utterly fail to communicate with more than a couple of cultural groups. Sometimes we can barely communicate within our own. Youth oftentimes take on a kind of sub-group. Consequently, we rarely step outside our social circle. And for that sin we ought to confess and receive forgiveness from Almighty God. We stand humbled before the Babe in Bethlehem who calls “all men to be saved and have knowledge of the truth”. The Christmas Story shows the Holy Infant immediately calling all. He starts with a poor Virgin. He continues with certain poor shepherds. He lies in the midst of the adoration of the Heavenly Host. He holds the hand of a carpenter. Today which is Epiphany, his glory is manifested unto the Magi. It’s incredible to contemplate that he would have a ministry to magi especially if we consider who these magi were. It is even more incredible to contemplate how those Magi became part of the story so that their actions continue to proclaim the Gospel.

Who were the Magi? The ESV as many other Bible translations opt for “Wise Men”. Carol writers contemplating Psalm 72 or Isaiah 60 call them kings as in “We Three Kings of Orient Are”. Jeremiah refers the Magi as princes (Jeremiah 34:3). The NIV is unique in that they leave the Greek basically untranslated as Magi. The word Magi also provides the root from which we get the word magicians and that is exactly what they were. Their wisdom was not all that God-pleasing since the Law of God specifically prohibits the dark arts of sorcery and astrology. These dark arts survive and indeed flourish in our own time. Our culture has embraced the J.K. Rowling’s “Hogwarts School of Wizardry” and its encouraged reading in our schools. Flip board signs stand outside of some homes even in residential areas advertizing “Healing possible through the stars”. In this New Year, the astrologers are featured guests on mainstream media. So already on one count of their dabbling in the dark arts we would not wish to mingle with magi. Yet, the Babe in Bethlehem calls such as these.

Secondly, it is their geography which would make it difficult for any of us to desire to make and call them friend. Coming from the East their origins are from ancient Persia or modern day Iran. When we think of that place, many think: terrorist, Islam, charlatan and maybe chauvinist. But the Christ Child does not deal in stereotypes. He deals in human beings. He sees them all alike. All are sinners in need of salvation. So he chooses to deal with them, at least initially, in a unique way. He begins with what they are interested in “the stars”. And by a star the magi are lead to see the Christ.

We would so well to begin where people are in their spiritual lives. God does this. He speaks through nature. He speaks through conscience. At one point in Scripture, it is recorded that he speaks through the mouth of Balaam’s donkey. He leads even his own people Israel through natural phenomena: the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day. He makes the Sun stand still at one point. But although he begins at one place, he always leads his people to his Word.

It is the Word which begins to shine brighter than any star in this Epiphany story. The magi discover their star is limited. They first go to Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem. Their reason, their human wisdom leads them astray into believing that if a King is to be born he must be born in the biggest, most important city of Jerusalem rather than a mere village of 2000 souls in Bethlehem. They believe he must be found in a king’s palace rather than a humble house. They are lead astray by the ambiguity of the star and their own human reason. A more reliable guide must be found. They go to Herod.

Now King Herod’s men, as corrupt as they are still know the power is in the Word. They search the prophets to reveal to the magi the exact location of the child. They unroll the scroll of Micah and read his prophecy.

And you O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
Are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
For from you shall come a ruler
Who will shepherd my people Israel.

The Magi came to Bethlehem. The star was still preceding them since they did not yet know the full trust of the Word nor did they know the exact location of the house. But still, the Word must have weighed heavily on these men. What kind of document did these Jews have? That written hundreds of years before the event, nevertheless proved to be accurate and true?

Their own prophecies and searching of the stars were never so detailed and never so accurate. Astrologers are content with accuracy that is pretty good. People, amazingly, will read the necromancers who have only 75 percent accuracy, or 60 or even 30. They read and in desperation clutch at the sorcerers like a dying man clutches at the medications from his quack. Maybe. Maybe this time he will be right.

But the test of biblical prophecy is absolute. We don’t need worry about relying on something “almost true” from the prophets. As an appendix our Bible Study textbook Lutheranism 101 includes a listing of 13 Old Testament Messianic Prophecies fulfilled in the Gospels. Three in particular deal with his birth and the visit of the Magi. The prophets said he would be born in Bethlehem and Matthew confirms that it was so. The prophets said he would be born of a Virgin

and Matthew affirms that this was so. Jeremiah said that Herod would kill the Innocents for the sake of the Christ, and Matthew affirms that the inconsolable cry of the mothers was heard. The Psalmist affirms that kings would come bearing gifts for the Christ Child. Our Epiphany text for today affirms that it was so as they laid before him gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Certainly the Word Incarnate shines brighter than any star of the Christmas Story. This star shining comes out of Jacob just as God's Word through the prophets had promised. The prophets foretold how the Magi would become unwitting heralds of the Christ's mission. Those who would be called by the Gospel would in turn call others by first becoming part of the "gospel story".

Gold for a King, frankincense for a Priest myrrh for a Prophet. Jesus would fulfill a three-fold office of Prophet, Priest and King. And indeed he would be acknowledged as such by all even Pontius Pilate, schooled in all things political. He would write on the cross and refuse to alter the words "King of the Jews" in Latin, Aramaic and Greek. . The priest would be a mediator between God and man offering up his prayers before the altar as incense. We know their ultimate end even as our Lord observes in later life.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, those who would kill the prophets and stone those sent to it (Matthew 23)"

Jesus would become one of those prophets to be killed. But he would be a prophet slain with salvific effect. He would be the Saviour of all! For the one to die would be different. The Magi knew that Christ was a different kind of king. "They bowed down and worshipped him". Who would they worship? They would worship only God. He would be perfect God and perfect man to die for our sins. As God, he would provide an infinitely valuable sacrifice. As man, the ability to die - vicarious atonement. The message of the Magi was to be fleshed out later but nevertheless it was there.

The Magi disappear from the Gospel story. "Being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod they departed for their own country another way". Their names of Balthazar, Melchior and Gaspar may be the tradition of Christians in the West, but such traditions are not unanimous. They are left nameless in holy writ but like so many of the nameless worshippers of Christ the evidence of their work remains. Look at a map depicting the spread of Christianity in the early centuries and you quickly see that the Persian Empire of old, modern day Iran had pockets of the faithful. Truly, a light came to lighten the Gentiles. The light still comes. It is the stronger light of the Word, absolutely. The Gospel would travel to all the world.

May we see Christ in flesh made manifest both here and throughout the whole world this Epiphany Season.

Amen.