

Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2019

There can be few passages of the Bible that have become as misrepresented as this one has throughout history. Not misrepresented in a bad way - but the story has become so mythologized that it is hard to sometimes focus in on what the story says rather than what we think it says.

The picture that many of us have of this story is so different from the real thing. We sing a carol, don't we?: "We three kings of Orient are". But they weren't kings – they were astrologers. You might know the names these kings have been given - Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. But there's no mention of that in the original story. And the story gets embellished even further. Melchior is represented in pictures and paintings as an old man, grey haired with a long beard and he brings the gold. Caspar is young and doesn't have a beard and he carries the frankincense. Balthasar is represented as having African origins with a newly grown beard on him and he brings the myrrh.

It's a nice image – but it's all embellishment on the story. None of it is recorded in the Bible.

So what we need to do is avoid the pitfall of romanticizing this story too much where we begin to miss the point of what we can learn of God and our own spiritual journey and our response to Jesus.

As I re-read this passage this year, for me, it is speaking of the response we can make to Jesus in our own lives. There are 3 very different responses to Jesus in this passage. Let's have a look at them...

The first response we see is in King Herod a response of anger and rejection

Herod has reigned as King in Palestine for nearly forty years and he wasn't called Herod the Great for nothing. He was the only ruler in Palestine ever to have kept peace and stability in that region. He was a brilliant architect and builder; a man of great vision. Not only that – but he could be very generous too. In difficult times, he was known to stop taxing people in order to give them a chance to survive. During one particularly tough famine, he even melted some of his own gold to buy corn for the starving people.

But there was one deep flaw in his character: he could be very suspicious and couldn't tolerate others rivalling his power and he was paranoid about people plotting against him. He murdered his wife and mother-in-law. He assassinated three of his sons. Anyone who got close to claiming power from him were dealt with.

So when the three visitors from the East arrive looking for the King of the Jews, we can just imagine his reaction. There's only one King of the Jews! No-one is taking that title from Herod! So, in his anger and paranoia, he decides to get rid of all the babies aged 2 and younger in the area of Bethlehem.

The very thought of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, made him angry. He rejected any notion that another person could have power and dominion over him.

It is not so unusual for the mention of the name 'Jesus' to make people angry. Perhaps you have mentioned Jesus in a conversation and been taken aback by the over-reaction of hostility you then faced. Often, that hostility and anger stems from a bad experience of church or Christians in the past, which then gets projected onto their view of Jesus.

For us, too, maybe there have been occasions in our own lives when we have felt angry at Jesus. Perhaps when events in our lives have taken a turn for the worst, or someone we love has become seriously ill or died. The pain in our lives has been so intense that we have doubted our experience of God and have rejected the very idea of faith in him.

So, like King Herod, one response to Jesus is to feel angry and to reject him; reject the claim of Lordship that he makes over our lives.

The second response to Jesus is that of the chief priests and teachers of the law. Their response is one of apathy and non-committal.

King Herod goes to the chief priests and teachers of the law for advice. "Where will the Messiah be born?" he asks them. And they know the answer. They've studied the Scriptures. They've asked the questions. It's all there in their heads: The Messiah will be born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea. They can even quote the verse to the King which backs up their theory.

But that's what is so sad - because that's all it is for them: theory. What would you expect from these great religious leaders? You would expect, in the next verse, to read of them all hurrying off to Bethlehem themselves to greet the Messiah they had been waiting for. But no. There's nothing of the sort. They give Herod the answer he needs and then they get back on with their own lives, untroubled and unconcerned with the news they've received.

How many people do we know who know the facts about Jesus in their heads but don't recognize him as King in their hearts? How often do we know in our heads what God wants from us but we become apathetic in delivering the goods and refuse to sit under his Lordship over us?

Apathy and being unprepared to make a commitment to God is a very real spiritual malaise. At the beginning of a New Year, it is always a good opportunity for us to look back and reflect on that which has gone before and look forward to how we can be more committed and passionate in faith for the future.

Herod rejected Jesus. The teachers of the law remained apathetic about Jesus. But there is a third way, which is the way of the visitors from the East. That way is to accept Jesus and to worship God as a result.

This is such an intriguing story for me - and it is only recorded in Matthew's Gospel, of course. But it seems to me that this is a beautiful parable of the journey of faith that we all go through as we move into a deeper experience of God as Christians.

The story of the visitors from the East is a four-stage journey: from the head to the heart.

First, they study the facts. Their journey of faith begins with them asking questions. They are astrologers – they study the stars - and when they see a strange star in the sky, they ask themselves questions about it.

Second, they know that the only way to get an answer is to set out on a journey. But that journey involves risk. They have to come to the court of the king and risk their lives to find out about Jesus. But their desire for truth is stronger than their fear.

Third, they come into the presence of Jesus and they worship, and part of their worship is to offer him gifts: theirs is a sacrificial worship that is prepared to give as well as to receive.

Finally, they make their way back home; back to their everyday lives, not leaving Jesus behind, but taking the experience of their encounter with them. Then there is that lovely touch in verse 12 which says that they went back by another road, inspired by God in a dream. It's true for all of us that once we meet with Jesus, we do take another road, life is never the same again. It's true too, that it is under the guidance of God that our route is chosen for us.

So in the response of the Eastern visitors to Jesus, we see our very own journey of faith. Starting with questions in the mind. Setting out on a journey, which will inevitably involve risk and vulnerability. But a journey that leads us to the Christ-child, where we give him all that we have to offer. Then God sends us out, inspiring us and guiding us, showing us the way to go; a new journey with the experience of Christ in our hearts. The way of worship and adoration; the way God chooses for us.

So, in this remarkable story, stripped of the tinsel and the imaginary names and the made up characters, we find the most basic of Christian truths. Every one of us is confronted with the Christ-child this morning and we need to make a response. Will we be like King Herod and reject Jesus? Will we be like the chief priests and teachers of the law and remain lost in apathy? Or will we be like the visitors from the East and step out on a journey of faith? A difficult journey, not without questions and doubts, not without personal difficulties, not without sacrificial actions - but a journey that leads to Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour. A journey that takes us on a new road; a new direction under God's guidance and within his grace and love and compassion.

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