

Homily for Epiphany, 2007

The King, the Wise Men, and the Star

Few of us can ignore a picture of ourselves, or even pass a mirror without glancing into it. And most of us, if we take a moment, find ourselves oddly interested in today's Gospel with its mysterious characters from the East – the “magi,” or “wise men,” or “astrologers.” What if these two things are connected?

That is, what if we're fascinated because the story of the Magi holds up a mirror to us? It's a longstanding practice to meditate on a Scripture text by imagining ourselves into it, playing the role of one or more characters: But what if our fascination with today's story comes from its power to help us to recognize two aspects of ourselves, played by the two major actors? And that those characters reveal a tug-of-war in our response to Christ's coming, so that the story wants to show us our own split reaction? This is what I mean.

Most of us have a part of us that is like the Magi: We want to approach Christ, even if we don't understand Him very well. (The Magi got it wrong, after all, in calling him “King of the Jews.”) We may not know what we think we ought to know (just as they had to get advice from the Jewish leaders – our training might be fuzzy as well). And what brings us to Christ might be a bit unconventional: They had their star, we might have any number of things that got us moving: the birth of a child, a bout with depression or drugs, loss of a job, a spouse's faith, our own puzzlement about living and dying... It might not be “by the book,” but just like the star that guided them something tugs at us, wants to get us going in the direction where we think Christ is to be found. But that Magi-like part of us is only part of the story; in the Gospel there's someone else.

It may not be pleasant to admit, but I know there's a bit of King Herod in me – and maybe you can find some of him in you, too. Herod is reasonably happy with his little kingdom just as it is. To take seriously the news from the Magi will be inconvenient – maybe even a threat. Of course, it's necessary for him to “make the right noises” and seem to be interested in Christ: “Tell me about it, so I too may go and worship” – but he knows he won't. Is there anything like that in you? “I'll go through the motions – even the motions of religion, maybe – just so long as I don't have to really change, especially change in ways that might make me uncomfortable. I won't step into the unknown, that's for sure!” I can trace a struggle between the Magi-part and the Herod-part in me – perhaps you can too.

And maybe that's where the star plays its role in us. We need something to get us moving toward Christ – the real Christ, who invites us out of our comfort and our routines. As you think about the Gospel during the rest of the Mass and later today, go back to your own star: What is it that leads you on, so that you want to come closer to Christ, want to grow more alive with His life? And notice your resistance: Maybe you're dimly aware that, if you do follow that star much further, it will cost you: the Magi eagerly gave away their treasures, after all. Maybe part of my Herod-like response is that I'd like to hold onto mine, and don't want to be drawn too far into a world of generosity. So if I do want to take the journey I need to keep my eye on that star that's led me this far.

One last detail: We know King Herod's name; he's not, really, us, although we may see some similarities. But the Magi's names are never mentioned, nor does the Gospel say how many there are. Maybe that's so that we can add ourselves to their number, and give one of those Magi, this year, the name that's our own.