

“A Strange Story” – Mat 2:1-12 – Jan 3/10

Over the years there have been several detective shows on television that I have liked to watch, in large part because of the main character. Jack Webb as Sgt. Joe Friday on Dragnet and Telly Savalas as Kojak were two who provided a sarcastic wit that enlivened the genre. But I especially enjoyed Peter Falk as Columbo and more recently John Thaw as Inspector Morse, both of whom used a particular technique. They would listen to a suspect's story as if they were completely absorbed and buying every word and would even begin to walk away as if completely satisfied with the story. At the very last moment, however, they would pause and with a simple “just one last question...” ask a particularly poignant question that would thrust a dagger of deep suspicion right through the heart of the story.

I must admit to having a reaction similar to Columbo or Inspector Morse whenever I read the account of the visit of the magi that we just read in Matthew's gospel. It's a fascinating and familiar story, but I think most of us remember only a very simplified version, recalling the part where they kneel before the infant Jesus and confer upon him gifts, some of which we don't recognize even if we know the names. When we hear or read the full story, however, there are some issues that cause me at least to ask, “uhhh, just one last question ...”

Because we mostly remember only a fraction of the story, let's review the whole of it, and see what details we usually ignore.

The story begins simply, and seemingly innocently enough. Matthew sets the scene and historical perspective, identifying Herod as the king, and being after the birth of Jesus. Although Matthew doesn't address why Jesus of Nazareth is actually born in Bethlehem in the way that Luke does, he is nevertheless careful to make sure we note that Jesus was born in Bethlehem – of Judea, lest we confuse that Bethlehem with any other Bethlehem. And then we meet the key players of the story – “some wise men from the east.” “Magi” is the actual word used, meaning astrologers, diviners, people of mystical talents – it's the root of the word “magician.” Although they apparently know the exact time of Jesus' birth, and even the place through prophetic utterances in the Hebrew scriptures, it seems that it was necessary for them to go instead to Jerusalem to enquire of the king where this new king might be found. Now this is the first of my “just one last question” ... if these guys are dumb enough to go to a king who has a nasty reputation to ask where they might find the child who would overthrow him, do they really deserve the title “wise men”?

Now in spite of wanting to show with these magi that the birth of Jesus was a sufficiently cosmic event that even foreign astrologers could detect it, it seems that Matthew didn't quite grasp the whole astrology concept. The magi report that they were aware of Jesus' birth through “seeing his star rising” – an astronomical event with what they considered a much deeper meaning – but that concept of a star rising morphs in the story to a star moving across the sky and eventually stopping not only over a small town but over a specific house within a small town. While I have another “just one last question” here, we'll roll with the understanding that they were divinely guided to the house (note – not stable) whereupon they do indeed greet the child and proffer their incredibly expensive gifts. It seems that because there were three gifts that a much later hymn writer would assume there were three magi, and so the misunderstanding of “three kings of orient” would eventually pervade all of Christendom. In truth, however, we have no idea how many magi there were, and the three gifts named all have a symbolic significance: gold was the exclusive possession of royalty; frankincense was used for censuring in worship rituals; and myrrh was an embalming substance, perhaps hinting at the death and resurrection to come.

In any event, the wise men finally display a great deal of wisdom, being smart enough not to return to Herod and instead lamming out of town presumably headed back east in a caravan – the camel type, not the British travel trailer. The story goes on beyond this point and gets even a bit stranger with Herod's apparent reenactment of the Egyptian slaughter of infants in the Exodus, but we'll stop here where this reading ends with the magi secretly disappearing into the night.

There are enough odd details here to make Columbo tug on his cruddy old raincoat and perhaps even light the cigar stub, and certainly enough for Inspector Morse to head for the local and instruct Lewis to draw a pint. How then do we begin to make some sense out of this story in a faithful way, to begin to see the grace of God being proclaimed in this gospel incident?

I think the best way is to draw back a bit from the literary details and try to see what points Matthew was trying to make by including this story. Given Matthew's penchant for trying to help the reader understand that Jesus was indeed the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, was indeed the messiah foretold in Hebrew scripture, it helps to identify the central point of the story which is the declaration by the magi to Herod that they knew the location "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'" Matthew wants us to be clear that the birth of Jesus was no accident, no random happening, that his birth was of such cosmic significance that even foreign astrologers could recognize the fulfillment of scripture.

The second point Matthew is trying to emphasise is that Jesus truly deserved the title "king of the Jews", a title that would eventually lead to his execution on the cross. The Jews expected the messiah to be another David, a might warrior king who would rid them of the occupiers and oppressors and bring them freedom. Matthew cannot emphasise enough that Jesus was the true Messiah, bringing freedom not from mere political oppression but freedom from the oppression of evil.

In recognizing these two key points we have the full intent of Matthew's proclamation: that this child was truly the Messiah, the holy king of Israel past, present and future; that this was the branch of Jesse's lineage, the one promised long before in Scripture, to whom the nations would come with gifts and worship; that this was the Son of God who would bring the light of God's love to all nations, even to the whole world. Indeed our very presence here this morning bears witness to that proclamation, not that we are all wise men – not all of us are men and not all of us are wise - but we do come from every corner of the earth, from a representative set of "all nations," gathered to offer praise and worship to that child born so long ago in Bethlehem of Judea. Like the wise men, we also come with gifts, opening our hearts, offering what we have in his service, presenting ourselves to him.

For most of us, I'm sure, the path to find that holy child – the fount of all goodness and light – was nowhere near as simple and as clear as it was for the wise men. Many if not all of us have wandered in our own darkness, either failing to see or ignoring the light provided by God as a beacon. And yet, praise God, we have persisted in our search, and like those wise men kneel before the Christ child, offering what we can. But also like the wise men, we are called to move on. The story didn't end with the wise men moving in, or even setting up camp in the house where they found Mary and the child. They moved on, back into their own lives, touched, affected, and changed by the encounter but back into their own places they went. Once a week, or even once a year, we have the blessed opportunity to re-enact their encounter, to be touched by the event and significance of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea, born the king of the Jews, the Son of God, the light of the world. But once we have knelt before the child, and

offered our gifts, it is time for us to once more move back out into our own places, and in so doing to carry forth the light brought by Christ. Time for us, shaped by his universe-shaking goodness to go and let that goodness shine forth from us, visible in our actions. The ways to do that are as numerous as the stars, the places in which to do good are as diverse as our backgrounds, but they can be summarized in Christ's own words: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the grieving, visit the lonely, love one another. It's not always easy, and there will be times when you will provoke the anger and hostility of the world towards goodness. But the call is as clear as the light of God's love that will guide you, and as strong as the love of God that will sustain you: Go, shine forth that light and love of God in the name of the child born in Bethlehem of Judea, Jesus of Nazareth, even Christ our Lord.