

The Good the Bad and the Indifferent

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: just one day short of two weeks ago we celebrated Christmas and reflected once again on the wonderful story of how our Savior and God was born our brother in human flesh. It was a great work of the Lord; at the time arguably, his greatest work to date. And so, it's right that we spend some time in meditation upon the mystery of the incarnation and praising God our Father for sending us his Son. But what's interesting to me is that the Church in its ancient wisdom has allocated just twelve days for observing Christmas. Today, as I mentioned earlier, we begin the season of Epiphany, the theme of which is showing forth and making known to the world this Jesus who is God's Son come to earth. And for this purpose, the Church allots a period of four to eight weeks (depending on the date of Easter). And I think there's a message here for us. It's this: yes, Christmas and what God did then is terrific; but at least as far as the Church is concerned, the greater task is getting people to know this Jesus and letting them hear what has to say. The miracle of Christmas does no good unless people get to know the Savior whom God sent.

And with this in mind, with today's Gospel reading we see that the Epiphany got off to a rather slow and erratic start. I mean think about it: the long-awaited hope of Israel, the Christ for whom God's people have been fervently praying for more than two thousand years—he's come: the promise is even now being fulfilled. He's alive and well and has been living with his folks in Bethlehem for about two years now. And it's just five or six miles from Jerusalem, which is the political and spiritual capital of the Jews—the people who have been keeping the ancient hope alive and waiting for the Savior to come. Yet no one there seems to know a thing about it. This despite the announcements made the night he was born. But the angels are long gone now; and the shepherds, well, who knows what happened to them? We do know in that day shepherds had a reputation for being low-minded, uncouth fellows who were given to strong drink and telling wild tales. On account of it the testimony of a shepherd was not considered admissible evidence in a court of law. It seems strange then that the Lord would entrust such an important message to the very fellows who would be least likely to be believed; but that's what he did (maybe it's because they needed to hear it the most). But there were more announcements. They happened when Jesus was just five weeks old and his parents took him to the Temple for his presentation. Then old Simeon and Anna recognized Jesus as the promised Savior. They told everyone who would listen; but apparently, they didn't make much of an impact either. No one paid them much attention. They were dismissed as just a couple of silly old folks blathering on about some baby they'd seen. And so for the most part, God's people continue to go on about their business in benighted ignorance of the recent birth and close proximity of their long awaited Savior and King.

That is, of course, until the arrival of the wise men, which we heard about this morning. And what's interesting here is that the people in Jerusalem were completely unmoved by the eyewitness testimony of Jewish shepherds and a pair of pious senior citizens, but they get all stirred up about the arrival of a few Gentile eccentrics who say that they're pretty sure an important Jewish king has been born because, after all, they read it in the stars. From a Jewish perspective, you'd think this latter testimony would

carry the least amount of weight. But this is the one that gets King Herod and the general populace to sit up and take notice.

But rather than receive the good news with excitement and joy, we're told that a dark cloud of anxiety descended on the city. Now with King Herod himself, it's not surprising. His official title was "King of the Jews". The funny thing was he wasn't really a king nor was he Jewish; and everybody knew it. He was in fact an Edomite – from a tribe of people who were ancient enemies of the Jews. But Herod was an ambitious man with a real talent for self-promotion. When the Romans who had conquered the land of Judah were looking for local of noble birth to name as their puppet ruler for the area, Herod stepped forward with all the smooth charm of a serpent. And through his well-oiled flattery and shameless exaggeration of the importance of his family, he managed to land the job. He spent the next forty years or so consolidating his power and ruthlessly destroying anyone who stood in his way. For the most part, the Jewish people hated him; though he did get in good with the religious leaders and Temple authorities by directing a series of major construction projects to beautify and expand the Temple. But that was Herod's way. He was corrupt to the core, but he liked to appear to be benevolent and devoutly religious. He was also a full-fledged paranoid. He had most of his own sons murdered because he feared they might be a threat to him one day. And now in his declining years, his health beginning to fail, he hears that the stars have proclaimed the birth of a Jewish King – a King apparently so significant that envoys from distant Babylon have come to pay homage. He knows that this can be none other than the promised Christ his subjects are always talking about – a real Jewish King in the line of David. And that's a threat to him and to his rule. So, it's easy to see why he's worried.

What's a little harder to understand is why the rest of Jerusalem is troubled. You'd think that this would be the news everyone was waiting to hear. Especially the religious leaders, the priests and the scribes— isn't this precisely what they'd been talking up and telling people to look forward to? "When the Christ comes everything is going to be so much better. Israel will be restored. We'll be freed from oppression. We'll be blessed by God. We'll all walk together in his ways. Oh, it's going to be grand and glorious when the Christ comes." And yet when they actually hear the news that it's happening, they aren't happy at all. They too see it as a threat.

Why is that? There are probably many reasons; but first among them has got to be plain and simple unbelief. And that's sad. Here are the people who know the Scriptures the best. When asked, they can say exactly where the Christ is to be born. And presumably they are active in worship in the Lord's Temple. That's what the priests do for a living. But evidently, they do not really believe very much in what they are saying and doing because if they did, don't you think they'd make the short trip to Bethlehem and investigate for themselves whether what the wise men were saying was true? But none of them goes. It appears that at least for some of them, their faith consists of an expansive knowledge of dead facts rather than a living hope in the Words and promises of God. For such as these the promise of the coming Christ is a cultural myth that unites the people – a myth that's important because it provides us with identity and tradition and history – but a myth nevertheless that no educated person seriously believes will ever come true. And so, for these, the problem presented by the arrival of wise men is the inevitable confusion and disappointment that occurs whenever stories of the Christ begin to circulate that get up the hopes of people too gullible or foolish to understand that it's all just a fable.

So, unbelief would be one cause of anxiety; but it's probably fair to assume that at least some of them really did believe the Christ would eventually come. Yet they too are troubled by the wise men's assertion that a great Jewish King has been born. And they too fail to seek him out. Why? Let me suggest that if they do believe and don't go look, it's precisely because they're afraid they might find him. But why would that frighten them? I think St. John says it best in his Gospel: men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. They stay out of the light for fear of being exposed. You see, it's one thing to talk wistfully about that grand and glorious day when Christ will rule in our hearts and we will walk in the ways of the Lord; but it's something else altogether to actually want to do it. "Why that would mean having to change, and I'm pretty comfortable with the way things are in my life right now, thank you very much. I've come to terms with my pet sins. I don't want to give them up. And I've a fair amount of hypocrisy going on here. I don't want anyone to know how I really am deep inside. This Christ is likely to know the truth. He's going to want to deal with it. And I've got other plans: plans for what I want to do and when I want to do it – and I don't want the coming of this King to mess them up or cause me to change them. So sure, I believe in the coming Christ – but I'd rather he not come just yet. I'd rather just talk about him from a safe distance. I don't really want to get to know him."

So, the end result is quite remarkable. The Jews in Jerusalem, the people who supposedly were waiting in eager expectation for the coming Christ, whether from unbelief or their sin or perhaps both, fail to go seek him out when they hear he has come and is sitting in what's essentially their own back yard. Those in the story who actually do something with Jesus are not of God's chosen people. Herod, the Edomite, takes action in a failed attempt to destroy him. And the only ones who receive him properly are the Gentile wise men who have come a great distance to find him. They press on to Bethlehem where they fall down before him in joyful worship and present him with their costly gifts of gratitude.

It's a familiar story to us; but what do we make of it? Well, first I'd have you see that it's a prophetic foreshadowing of what will happen later when Jesus actually completes his earthly mission. Then the representatives of the Roman government will be successful (well, at least for a short time) in their attempt to destroy Jesus. Then too the Jewish people will largely fail to receive their King. Instead, as in this story, the King will be honored and received with joy mostly by Gentiles as the disciples and followers of Jesus carry the saving message of his Gospel to the ends of the earth. So it's kind of interesting the way that works out.

But I think it's more important that we apply the story to ourselves personally. What do I mean? Just this: spiritually speaking now we are God's chosen people. We are the ones with the Scriptures and the promises of God, and we are the ones eagerly anticipating the coming of Christ. And let me suggest that each one of us is like a little Jerusalem. Inside we've got our own King Herod: that ambitious, prideful spirit that's into self-promotion and maybe touched with a bit of paranoia. It's the sin nature in us that knows deep down it doesn't belong on the throne of our hearts, and knows too that it can't stay; but it's going to hang on for as long as it can no matter what it takes.

In addition to him we've got our unbelief: that portion of our mind that doubts and questions, that thinks of the faith as a nice story that's really too good to be true but that provides us with identity, tradition, a social construct, an extended family, and a moral compass. Christianity is good as long as we don't take it too seriously.

And then too we've got that part that believes, but that fears getting too close to Jesus. It likes to think and talk about him from a safe distance but doesn't want to be drawn into a deeper relationship because that would mean change. It would mean more spiritual housecleaning, giving up those pet sins, maybe spending more time in study, meditation, and prayer; it might even mean changing my plans and doing things differently with my life. And I'm not so sure I want to do that. I'm okay with the way things are now.

If any of this sounds familiar to you, then we've identified some citizens within that are going to miss out on the Epiphany. They won't see Jesus as he comes in his grace and mercy. When they meet the King, it will be when he comes in judgment.

It's better that we deal with them now. It's the wise thing to do. And so, confessing our sins and putting to death the Herod, the unbeliever, and the lukewarm follower within, let's press on to know this King who was born to be our Redeemer from sin. And receiving the gifts of his grace and forgiveness purchased at infinite cost by his death for us, let's join the wise men in falling down before him in worship, and let's each one present him with the treasure of life lived for him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!