

Often this time of year, churches read the story of the Wise Men who came to Bethlehem to visit the child Jesus. What do we really know about the story? Well, there are a lot of things with a question mark, for sure. First of all, the story only shows up in one Gospel, Matthew Chapter 2. The other gospel writers do not corroborate or tell this story. This is not to discount the story, only to say that Matthew has his slant or bias, with no other writings for comparison, and Matthew was not an eyewitness to Jesus' earliest years.

So legendary material creeps in ... over the years the story became that there were THREE of these "Magi", and even gives them names, (Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar), yet all Matthew says is that Wise Men (plural) came from the East. Two or more came; and since it was surely a long and dangerous trip, there may have been the safety of a whole caravan coming on camels! Over the years, the manger scenes put crowns on their heads, so we wind up with the idea of three KINGS. Many scholars suggest that they were astrologers. And we know that a movement or conjunction of planets, as we have seen recently, could have been seen as one STAR, but hovering over one little town of Bethlehem? (One of our elders has a good explanation of how "kings" became the preferred image ... Can you imagine singing "We three astrologers of orient are???" The words wouldn't have fit the rhythm and rhyme!) And we know that these sages were not at the manger scene, since the original languages say they arrived and entered the house where the "little child" was.

Speaking of "legendary" aspects is not to dismiss such stories; we remember the saying, I believe Native American, "I don't know if x,y,z actually happened, but I know it's TRUE." Most of the early readers of holy scriptures were not interested in scientific explanations or literal interpretations. They realized how many faith stories involved poetry and symbolism, and pointed to deeper truths.

Moving on to the symbols and deeper truths... Matthew may have heard this story about wise men from Jesus' mother. He also

would have heard that the local King Herod was a fearful king, wanting to kill or do away with any possible threat to his power. The sages knew that Jesus would be a different kind of “king.” They brought three kinds of gifts: GOLD , a gift fit for a king, the highest earthly value, to show great honor for a future leader of Israel. Some say it was like starting a trust fund for the child! Little did they know that Jesus’ crown would not be a crown of gold, but a crown of thorns! Which brings us to the gift of MYRRH. We know that it was an anointing oil for the sick or dying. Many think this was foreshadowing the pain and suffering that Jesus would go through... that he would be like the “suffering servant” that Isaiah prophesied. And the gift of FRANKINCENSE... Incense is symbolic even nowadays in various churches, symbolic of prayers, a life of praise and prayer. Our song says “Incense owns a deity nigh;” so this frankincense was not only good aromatherapy, but an actual invocation of the Divine Spirit.

So the story of the Wise Men or Kings, is true in that it is rich with symbolism about who Jesus would become. It is really about the kingship of Jesus, and those who seek to behold him. These wise, royal and probably rich astrologers from eastern countries are said to have kneeled before the child with humble praise. Their example is one of HUMBLY SEEKING. Imagine, the wisest leaders from eastern lands seeking a new leader in the world, and falling on their knees when they believed they had found him. So the saying that has arisen in Christian circles is “Wise Men Still Seek Him.” Whether you have been seeking diligently all your life, or whether you are new to a life of faith, we know it is the very act of seeking that can bring rewards of finding. The posture of seeking is a posture of openness, in mind and heart; the Divine Spirit can surely enter such minds and hearts. Hardened hearts and closed minds can shut out the Spirit.

The Wise Men humbly seeking the child foreshadows the kind of “king” or leader that Jesus would become as he grew. Those who follow Christ would be fools if we just sang songs about his birth all

year. No, the Nativity stories, their truths mingled with legend, have the seeds, the kernels of Jesus' life as a "HUMBLE King," a SERVANT Leader, one who WALKS WITH the people, especially the poor or oppressed. The world needs such leaders! Everything in Jesus life points to this. He was one who could put ego aside. Paul said: "He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself and took the form of a servant." The prophecies from Isaiah and Micah point to this kind of ruler: (The Messiah will be a "suffering servant" says Isaiah. "From you Bethlehem, though small among the clans, will come one to rule Israel," says Micah). The Hebrew Psalm that we read points to the qualities of a good king: one who will "defend the cause of the poor, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor!" Jesus was always trying to lift up the little guy. We remember how he described his mission in the beginning of Luke... that he has come to minister to the oppressed, the captives, the blind and the poor. The world needs such leaders! Good to ponder as we see the most devastation of Covid 19 among the poor, among people in crowded housing. Jesus' birth in a stable, (or some say probably a cave inside of rocky cliffs) speaks of the poverty and oppressed refugee status of the Holy Family into which he was born.

Humility was a key virtue for Jesus; remember how he was sort of disgusted with the disciples squabbling over who would have a seat of honor, or who was the greatest among them? So Jesus puts a little child in front of them! ... And remember he said, even when you fed or clothed or visited the least of these, you did so unto me. We can jump even to the end of his life and remember the image of him washing the feet of all the disciples: Humble, Servant Leadership. "The one who is great among you must be servant of all" Jesus said. (No room for ego trips among his followers.) The World needs such leaders... who put the needs of others and the community before their own need for power or control.

I'll close by singing one song's vision of the humble and transforming kingship of Jesus, a focus on why Jesus is the Christ in Christmas, why the kind of king people were hoping for is seen in Jesus and his life. It is from the cantata "The Weaver," by Ken Medema and Buryl Red, These are the lyrics:

*Here is the One who comes to give love a name.*

*Here is the One who has come to show the way.*

*Here is the One who has come to the dying,*

*Here is the One who gives hope to the homeless,*

*Here is the One who will open the gates of love.*

*Here is the One who will raise up the humble,*

*Here is the One who will challenge the haughty,*

*Here is the One who will bring the Good News of peace.*

His words have been spoken time and time again; Yet, we will not hear Him when He calls to us. His message is written down in countless books; Yet only if you will ever hear Him, and follow Him.

*Here is the One whose life will never cease:*

*Here is the One whom death could not contain.*

*Here is the One who makes joy out of sadness,*

*Here is the One who brings hope in the madness,*

*Here is the One whose life will never cease.*

Prayer: We open our hearts and minds to the Presence and leading of Jesus the Christ, the "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."