



January 22nd, 2006

Bible Study

Mathew Ch. 2 > React to JESUS

written by George Aramath, Seminarian

The second chapter of Matthew gives the narrative of the birth of Christ. This chapter combined with the second chapter of Luke provides us an idea of the circumstances surrounding the first Christmas. Where Luke focuses on the visit of the shepherds, Matthew focuses on the wise men. In using these two writings, we get a glimpse of how the birth of our Savior occurred.

Matthew begins by narrating the visit of the wise men or Magi. Who were these men? In his commentary on Matthew, Father Kaniyamparmabil describes the Magi by quoting historians of the past. Philo of Alexandria writes, "The Persian Magi were esteemed as honorable and virtuous sages. Skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science, they became the scholars of Persian society". They were considered to be in the elite class, well-established and well-known for their religious duties within the Persian Empire. One of their expertises is astronomy. As our Malpan writes in his commentary, "they believed, like most people in antiquity, that Heaven communicated its desires and intentions through signs, comets, stars and astronomical phenomena. Indeed, a person's destiny was considered determined by the stars under which one was born." This would explain why they came in search of the Jewish King by following a star. As said in verse 2, the Magi followed the star in the east in search of the king whom they desired to worship.

The verses that follow give the reader an impression of King Herod, the ruler of Judea. The king reacts in fear when he heard the question of the wise men, "where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (v. 2). The integrity of these men is evident because Herod and all of Jerusalem are immediately disturbed when they hear that another king is born. Herod's character up to this point is only a continuation of his brutal past. His appointment as governor was resented by most Jews since his mother was an Arab, and therefore he was not a Jew. But he tried to build his reputation through public projects. "In Jerusalem, the king built a new market, an amphitheater, a theater, a new building where the Sanhedrin could convene, a new royal palace, and last but not least, in 20 BC he started to rebuild the Temple". When his throne was challenged, he went to the extent of killing his brother-in-law and even his own sons. By knowing Herod's past, one gets an idea of why Jerusalem, too, was disturbed by the visit of the Magi (v.



January 22nd, 2006

3). They either did not want to lose the king who had been generous to them, or they feared that their king would begin another rampage. But one thing is obvious; the news of Christ's birth disturbed many.

The chapter then proceeds into the whereabouts of this birth. Herod calls together the chief priest and teachers (v. 4) who eventually conclude that the birth will be in Bethlehem based upon a prophecy made in Micah 5:2. As many of us can attest to, the book of Micah is rarely read and spoken of. But these chief priests and teachers knew the Old Testament so well that they discovered the birthplace from this minor book. Malpan Kaniyamparmabil writes that the chief priests were writers and scholars and also the guardians of the Law. "The more highly esteemed the Law became in the eyes of the people, the more its study and interpretation became a lifework by itself, and thus there developed a class of scholars who, though not priests, devoted themselves assiduously to the Law". Furthermore, the process of becoming a scribe was not easy. "To become a scribe one has to be trained under a scribe for four years. When he turns 30, other scribes would examine him. They would lay their hands over to give the scribe-hood. Then they would be given a writing plank and a key (Luke 11:52). The key was the symbol of authority to reveal the mystery of the Law". Therefore, being professionals of the Laws and Scripture, it is no small wonder that they were able to find the exact place of the Messiah's birth.

The wise men then proceed to find the baby at a house (v. 11), showing that Joseph probably found a more suitable place for his family by this time. These highly esteemed men prostrate before the baby and worship Him. They then present Him with gifts. It is a tradition of old that one must visit a king with gifts as seen, for instance, in the story of the queen of Sheba visiting Solomon "with a very great caravan" of gifts (1 Kings 10:2). It must be noted that each of these presents are symbolic of the different qualities of our Messiah. The gold points to His kingship, for kings are adorned with gold, while the frankincense points to His priesthood. Our Syriac hymns speak of our prayers rising to God like the smoke of incense offered by the priest on the censer. And finally "myrrh was used to apply to a dead body, signifying His humanity and suffering". With these three gifts, God symbolically professes and reminds us of His qualities and purpose of His Son's incarnation.

The last portion of this chapter narrates dangers that the baby faces and how God's angel brings Him protection. The family escapes to Egypt to avoid Herod's persecution and then settles in Nazareth after Herod's death. The details of Herod's death show the consequences for those who work against God. Experts believe that "an infection in Herod's abdomen could have spread



January 22nd, 2006

to his groin and rectal areas (Herod is said to have complained of abdominal pain). Records also indicate the swelling at the leader's groin was further wracked by an infestation of worms, and there were maggots feeding on the tissue." It must be noted here that even though Herod worked against God and tried to destroy the Messiah, God nevertheless worked through him to help the wise men. But ultimately Herod met the consequences of his actions.

The second chapter of Matthew holds many lessons. The birth of Christ is the greatest gift of Christmas. Exchanging of gifts is a tradition that began with the first Christmas in Bethlehem, and we are called to continue this tradition not just between ourselves but with God also. Nowadays we hear of the gift of God offered to us through His Incarnation. But we forget that we must also present a gift to Him in return. If He is our king, we can only approach Him with gifts, like the wise men. In another words, as God gave us His life, we must return the gift by giving our life to Him. This is why Jesus says, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).

How are we to give our lives to Him? This entails the necessity of change. Matthew presents to us three different reactions to God's birth dealing with this change. King Herod reacts with fear. He is afraid that this baby would take His throne. He did not want to give up power or make changes in his life. It is ironic that Jesus later proclaims that he did not come to become king of this world; for he tells Pilate, "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Nevertheless, Herod wants to destroy the child because he fears the changes that this birth would bring. So he is reluctant of change.

The chief priests, on the other hand, react with no reaction at all. As mentioned earlier, they knew Scripture so well that they discovered the Messiah's birthplace. But their indifference is shown in that they do not follow the wise men to see the Messiah. As the saying goes, it's not what you know that matters but what you do with it. They knew and studied Scripture, but they missed the point. They have a reaction of not caring. Essentially, no change is seen.

The wise men are indeed wise in that they react to God's birth with change. They traveled hundreds of miles across the desert to find Jesus and then they worship Him and present Him with gifts. One may wonder what came of these men. Malpan Kaniyamparmabil writes, "It is also said that St. Thomas met theses Magi in Persia when he was preaching the Gospel and he baptized them. Further they helped the saint in spreading the Gospel." How great and awesome is our God! He rewards those that seek Him and react to His birth with change.



January 22nd, 2006

Like the wise men, we are called to move in a different direction than we initially came after encountering God. In other words, if Christ is born within us, we are changed; for we can not be like Herod or the high priests. St. Paul writes that we must become a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Changes need to take place in our lives. Habits that hold us back from God must be removed. We must replace it with habits that draw us closer to Him, such as daily prayer, confession, taking the Eucharist, etc. In fact, out of the seven sacraments in our church, two should be constantly repeated. We should regularly confess in front of a priest and then take God’s body and blood to renew ourselves. This is where the gift of God exchanges with our gift. As God gave us the gift of forgiveness through His death and resurrection, we must return the gift with a change of heart towards God. As we daily recite from Psalms 51, “a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (v. 17). The purpose behind observing the Laws is to draw our hearts closer to Him. As we pray daily, observe our Lents, attend the Mass, etc., it would all be futile if our heart is not changed. We cannot be like King Herod or the chief priests. May the birth of Christ lead us to be “born again” (John 3:7) with a new heart towards Him. With Christ, there is change.

Summary Points:

- The birth of Christ affected three people in different ways:
 - 1) King Herod reacted with fear because he would be forced to give up power
 - 2) The scribes and chief priest, though they knew Scripture, did not care and showed no reaction
 - 3) The wise men sought the Messiah and presented Him with gifts of their own
- What is your reaction to God’s gift of His incarnation? If you offer your gift of positive change(s), then Christ lives in you.