

“Wise is Not Always Wise”
Matthew 2:1,2

Today is January 6th, thirteen days after Christmas, what we also call Epiphany. It is the day set aside by the Christian church to remember the visit of the magi to present the child Jesus their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There actually is a lot we don't know about the magi. So, down through the centuries, tradition has tried to fill in those gaps in a sensible way.

For instance, the Bible never tells us how many magi there were. Tradition sets the number at three because of the three different gifts. We know there were at least two magi because the Bible speaks of them in the plural, and you need at least two to have a plurality. There could have been three, and that is the most logical conclusion. But could there have been four? Remember, these were men. So, could it have happened that as the first three men presented their gifts to the child Jesus, the fourth one got an embarrassed look on his face and said, “I didn't know we were supposed to bring gifts. Nobody told me.” Typical man. Okay, that tradition probably won't get any traction.

Nor do we know exactly where the magi came from. All the Bible says is that they came from east of Judea. Babylon is the most likely. Tradition, of course, says that one of the magi came from China, one from Babylon, and one from Africa. Most likely all the magi were from the same country because the Bible says that when they left the house they departed to their own country (singular) by another route (singular).

Two more traditions about the magi. Tradition tells us that the magi were kings. But this tradition didn't appear in any writings until the 6th century, more than 500 years after the event. Besides if they all did come from the same country, would there be more than one king of that

country? What one country would have three kings? Also, the magi weren't referred to as "wise men" until the 8th century. It was first then, during the age of the Enlightenment, that the magi were viewed as wise seekers of the true God. Before the 8th century, however, the magi were not viewed as wise at all, at least not in terms of true wisdom. Their wisdom was in things detested by God. And this leads to my point today that wise is not always wise.

It is interesting that in the Greek scriptures the word "magi" is used only twice—here in Matthew chapter 2 and in the Old Testament book of Daniel chapter 2. In Daniel, when King Nebuchadnezzar wanted an interpretation of his dream, he summoned "the wizards, the magi, and the sorcerers" (Daniel 2:2) to do it. They were considered wise because, using occult practices, they could interpret dreams. However, to put their wisdom to the test, King Nebuchadnezzar demanded that the magi tell him both the dream and its interpretation. The magi instantly admitted that they were not that wise; no one was. How could they possibly know what Nebuchadnezzar dreamed unless he told them? Of course, the story ends with Daniel being able to do exactly what the king wanted because Daniel was given wisdom from God that the magi did not have.

So, the magi basically were astrologers, fortune-tellers, skilled in various practices of the occult. These certainly are not things pleasing to the Lord for gaining wisdom. In fact, the wisdom of the magi was viewed by true believers as wisdom opposed to God. Magi were people to avoid. They were Gentiles who didn't know or believe in the true God. Oh, they were wise alright, but wise in sinful things. They did not possess true wisdom. After all, wise is not always wise.

So, how is it, then, that the Gentile magi show up in the land of the Jews reverencing the Jewish baby Jesus? What were *they* doing there? Well, the magi are simply a continuation of what was happening to the other characters involved in the birth narrative of our Lord. Did pious Joseph, the husband of Mary, have the wisdom to know what God was up to with his virgin, but now pregnant, fiancé? No, God had to send His angel to Joseph in a dream to reveal it to him. Did the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem have the wisdom to know not just the where but the when of the arrival of the King of the Jews? No, the magi from the east had to reveal that to them. Did the magi have the wisdom to know not just the when but the where of the King of the Jews? No, God had to reveal it to them by the star.

Can you see what is happening here? No one can know God's ways of salvation on their own, by their own wisdom. It must be revealed to them. Even the so-called wise ones of this earth do not know God or His Son without divine revelation. Jew or Gentile, scribe or magi, shepherd or step-father, no one knows the truth about the babe born in Bethlehem unless it is revealed to Him by God through His Word. Indeed, do you remember when the apostle Peter confessed the truth of Jesus' identity when He asked the twelve, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Peter. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17). Even the called apostles of the Lord did not have natural wisdom about God. They had to have it revealed to them so they could be saved.

St. Paul summarizes all this so beautifully when he wrote to his brother in Christ, Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the Holy Scriptures, which are able to

make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:14,15). The truly wise ones are those who know Jesus as their Savior, for they have been given a wisdom that this world can never possess on its own. All the studies of math, science, the arts, the stars make you wise to other people, but there is only one way to be wise before God—to confess your own ignorance of Him and allow Him, through the hearing of His Word, to reveal Himself to you thus making you wise unto salvation. So, even a child who knows that Jesus loves him or her is infinitely wiser than the genius who does not believe in Christ. Remember, wise is not always wise.

This is one of the great lessons of the Epiphany. God reveals Himself through His Word to all. By nature, we all are the same—ignorant of God and oblivious to His plan of salvation. But by His grace, God reveals Himself to ignorant man that we may truly know Him as our Father, our Savior, and our King.

Oh, and this is another great lesson of the Epiphany. The contrast between the two kings in this text is shockingly stark. Who are the two kings? King Herod and infant King of the Jews, Jesus. One is a false king. The other is the true King. The false king, Herod, was wealthy, politically gifted, intensely loyal, an excellent administrator, and shrewdly clever, doing just enough to stay on the good side of people when it was to his advantage. But he loved power, he inflicted incredibly heavy taxes on the people of his realm, and, as he got older, he became extremely paranoid that others were plotting to take his throne. In fits of rage and jealousy, Herod killed several of his close associates, his own wife Mariamne (a woman of Jewish descent), and at least two of his own sons. No wonder all of Jerusalem was disturbed along with Herod about news of a newborn king of the Jews. The people knew what ruthless Herod was likely to do with news of this “competitor.”

By contrast, the true King, the one who was born King of the Jews, is unknown, weak, and in need of protection. He is born in a stable and laid in a manger in little, insignificant Bethlehem, and was raised in the back-woods village of Nazareth. He comes not seeking power and fame but to serve. He comes not in glory but in humility. He comes not to kill and destroy but to be killed so that He may lift others up to remarkable heights.

The true King comes to you and to me today in His Word to reveal Himself as our one and only Savior. He comes to you and to me today to make us truly wise; wise in God's way of salvation which is by His grace alone received by faith alone. He comes to you and to me today to give us true wisdom which leads us to forsake fallen ways, fallen ideas, and fallen speech, and to pursue holiness of living in our daily lives.

Do you remember the unnamed woman of Acts chapter 16 who had the spirit of divination and so made her owners a lot of money with her ability to predict the future? She is about the closest thing to the magi after the events of Matthew chapter 2. What happened when Paul and Silas revealed to her the true plan of God's salvation? The occult spirit that possessed her and gave her the fallen spirit of divination came out of her and she was changed. She was now free from slavery to that unclean spirit.

This is what happens when people come into contact with the true King Jesus. They are changed. They give up their fallen ways and pursue wisdom in the Holy Scriptures. For us Christians that certainly means that we will have nothing anymore to do with those things that are part of the magi's arsenal—the occult things of horoscopes, lucky charms (not the breakfast cereal, but things like four-leaf clovers, rabbit's feet, or other charms that supposedly bring good luck), fortune-tellers, palm readers, card readers, psychics, and all such rubbish. People who

possess the wisdom of Christ give up and avoid such things. None of that is true wisdom. In fact, it is the exact opposite. It is spiritual folly.

By God's grace given to you through Word and Sacrament, you are truly wise to know the salvation of Jesus Christ. So don't let anyone despise your wisdom or try to rob you of it. And don't let your own sinful nature let you become careless with that wisdom or take it for granted. Instead, through regular contact with the Word of God, let that wisdom in you grow and flourish and become an even more active part of your daily life. That is true wisdom. That is being wise beyond the wisdom of the world. God grant it for Christ's sake. Amen.