

One Baby-Three Classes of Men

(From the Gospel of The Epiphany [Jan. 6th]: *Matthew ii.1. ff.*)

The First Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, *2* Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. *3* When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. *4* And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. *5* And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, *6* And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. *7* Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. *8* And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. *9* When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. *10* When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. *11* And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. *12* And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Today's Gospel presents to us three very distinct classes of men who are part of the story of Christ's birth: the *wise men*, *Herod the king*, and the *chief priests and scribes of the people*. The way that each of these classes reacts to this event is highly instructive as to how Jesus Christ has always affected men, even today. The differences are marvelous, and only underscore how very significant was the Advent of that tiny Life two millennia ago.

First we have *men from the east*. Their arrival on the scene is apparently so unexpected and so unusual that *all Jerusalem* is upset by it. We are not given details as to why the city was so affected. But we can be assured that these men were notable, to say the least: they are foreigners, and carry with them the exotic flavor and appearance of something new and mysterious. They are also a strange combination of scholar, and metaphysician, and even scientist, because they have obviously been busy closely examining natural phenomena, but have interpreted what they've seen --a *star in the east*-- as a supernatural omen of the greatest possible significance. It would have been clear to their Jewish hosts that these travelers are on a mission of utmost importance to them, one they would not possibly have casually embarked upon, considering the distance, inconvenience, and expense. Surely there is a focus and intensity in their demeanor that only adds to the excitement and tension of their coming. But there is yet another element which is even more unnerving--the religious--: *we are come to worship*. Here are these foreigners, bearing witness to an "epiphany" [a "manifestation of a divine or supernatural being"] right in the very midst of Israel, right under its very nose, as it were! What had begun for the magi as mere

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

curiosity had developed into full-blown academic study and research that in turn had brought them to the highest level of all human endeavor..., that of worship and adoration.

This brings us to the next class of men whom we encounter in this story of stories, *the chief priests and scribes of the people*. Their reaction to the wise men must have been multifaceted. As academics, they would have been intrigued by the unexpected appearance of learned men. These were Jewish scholars, with that peculiar fascination with details and their implications, who delighted in analytic discussion, and a seemingly endless preoccupation with every inference that can be distilled from any detail deemed worthy of examination. Surely they would have relished the possibility of sitting down with these visitors as intellectual peers, comparing notes, examining the holy texts, and developing a theory of some sort in response. But there is a very real sense in which their “turf” has been rudely intruded upon by these uninvited aliens. After all, matters associated with Jewish dispensations, including the coming of Messiah, should have been within the scholarly province only of the elite, educated divines who alone were authorized to hold forth in this area of study. That any other would claim or occupy such a place would be a gross impertinence and presumption. Added to such indignation would be the embarrassment of having been caught unawares --trumped as it were by players who weren’t even in the game-- blissfully unconscious of the most long-awaited event in the Jewish heart: the arrival of the King, the Son of David, a promise reiterated often in the very Scriptures through which their own fingers constantly pored. But most mysterious of all is this: that their humiliation and disappointment at these personal affronts --never intended, obviously, as such, by the wise men-- fail to dissipate, giving way to the only reasonable and true response to Christ’s Advent --highest praise and worship. Instead, their attitude hardens into the unthinkable: a jealous opposition and rejection that will some day crystallize into treachery and murder... “How can such a thing be?” we are left asking ourselves. “How could this possibly happen...?”

We now arrive at the last class of men: *Herod the king* and his followers. Herod, says the Bible, is *troubled* [Thayer: “to strike one’s spirit with fear or dread”], *and all Jerusalem with him. Troubled...?! Herod has no pretensions as a scholar, nor any concerns about the undermining of his credentials. He is not even slightly alarmed over any loss of status among his peers. His fears are extraordinarily basic and simple: he will tolerate no threat to his position as king. As a non-Jew, in collusion with the hated Roman authorities, his position in Israel is already precarious. Surrounded by sycophants, but always likely beset with insecurity, any tokens of power independent of his own, even that of a helpless Infant born in poverty, were intolerable. His contempt for the wise men and fears of the implications of their tidings must have barely been disguised by his hypocritical pretense of wanting to worship the Child. He probably did little to hide his frustration over the obtuseness and ignorance of the Jewish scholars whom he called upon for*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

help, who seemed to be as flummoxed as he was by the appearance of the magi. Ironically, he alone in Jerusalem seems to fully understand the significance of this news, though for the most perverse of reasons. His fear and rage against Christ is instantly ignited, and he becomes an immediate danger to the life of the newly arrived Savior, as evidenced by his slaughtering of the Holy Innocents soon after. Long after his demise, a hatred bred of different causes that had matured slowly and deliberately among the Jewish establishment since these days we are focusing upon, would accomplish the same ends that Herod had sought to bring to pass so quickly.

Three classes of men! *Wise men*, who have found in a few moments of worship, in the humblest of settings, the consummation of their lives devoted to one of those disciplines that men most highly praise: intellectual pursuit and advanced learning, professional men who doubtless enjoyed great public respect and admiration. Men nevertheless capable of setting it all aside to obey the dictates of faith, and kneel before an unknown Child in a distant land whose own denizens were either unconcerned, or whose reactions were bizarrely incongruous with what was underway among them. Great men whose true greatness was evidenced by their recognition of a Greater One. The *chief priests and scribes*, whose study of holy things had taken the place of the One to whom such efforts should have been entirely directed, a religious establishment erected ostensibly in honor of the One whose very arrival constituted its greatest threat. A *king* who like so many of the rich, powerful, and influential, is so filled with fear that he will be toppled from the precarious pinnacle he has fought to occupy that *any* sign of a challenge to his position --even the simple birth of child-- represents his greatest dread.

Is it not so now? *Wise men* from all walks of life who are willing to follow the star of faith will always be willing to prove that “he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose” (Jim Elliot). The magi persisted, and put all the rest of the world to shame, even the covenanted nation of Israel, by allowing nothing nor anyone to stop them. Their worship of Christ was a selfless act of surrendering all that they were, ever had been, and ever hoped to be, as men. They were rewarded with that one prize which is truly the end sought by all men in every endeavor of life: *exceeding great* [Thayer: “violent, vehement”] *joy*. Perhaps they laughed, and sang, and danced! Meanwhile, religious authorities turn away from the one chance to encounter the very Essence of their vocation, because the institutions of men exist only for their own perpetuation. And governments that dishonor God are obliged to shore themselves up with ever-increasing control over the lives of people, lest their arbitrary power be rivaled and toppled.

And meanwhile, an Infant rests in the arms of a poor but adoring mother, watched over by the ever-vigilant gaze of a protective foster-father.

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King!”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.