

A Real Contrast

Matthew 2:1-12

January 2, 2011

There are two responses to Jesus in this text. Matthew focuses on the response of the Magi. These guys were a rather interesting group. They were from what was ancient Babylon. It is now Iraq. They were the scientists and political advisors of their day. They studied the sky as astrologers looking for signs as to what was happening around the world and what the future held. They studied the writings, especially the sacred writings, of the people around them. We know they had a passing familiarity with the Old Testament as the sacred writings of the Jews, and they were aware that the Jews were looking for the Messiah to come. They had a fully developed system to understand the movement of the planets and other signs in the sky, and generations back they had assigned meanings to the constellations in the sky. They did not worship God, but they had a lot of respect for Him. They continued to worship their gods, and follow the teachings of Zoroaster, but they also remembered the power the Jew's God demonstrated when the Jews were brought to Babylon in exile. The Magi knew **God** could do what He wanted, so they were watching with the Jews to see when the Messiah would come.

We do not really know what the star they saw in the sky was. While they were in their homes in the east, keeping watch in the heavens for signs of the gods' activity, they saw something that drew their attention to Judea. The Magi had come to associate the constellation Leo, the lion, with Judea. It may be that a new bright

star appeared in the sky in Leo, showing that a powerful king had been born. Whatever the sign was that God gave them, it drove them to the palace in Jerusalem where they would expect to find the new king. It was only later that it led them right to the place where the child lay.

Once the star appeared, they began their preparations. The Magi wanted to acknowledge this new king and pay Him proper respect. It took time to get all the preparations made. It took even more time to make the journey to Judea from Iraq. The best guess is that they arrived in Jerusalem looking for Jesus about 18 months after the birth. Jesus was no longer an infant in a manger. He was a toddler in a house.

The Magi put a caravan together. There would have been a minimum of about 12 people or so, and there may have been many more. It was a long and perilous journey and they were carrying precious items. There would probably have been more than three Magi, and each of them would have had his servants and probably some soldiers or armed guards to protect the group from wild animals and bandits along the way. It must have been an impressive group, especially once they reached the little village of Bethlehem.

We may never know in this life if they understood the appropriateness of their gifts. Gold was a gift fit for a king, and so it was to be expected. Incense was used in worship in the Temple, and so may have been provided in recognition that the child was a Jew. Myrrh was an expensive spice that was used for a variety of things, including the preparation of a body for burial. The church has long seen in these gifts of the Magi the

foreshadowing of Jesus' roles as King, Priest, and Prophet, and also as the sacrifice made by God, buried in a tomb for our sin, and resurrected in response to God's forgiveness of our sin and His gift of eternal life.

This was the response of the Magi to Jesus' birth. It was made clear by them as they explained to Herod what they were about. *"We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."* (v.2) These men were not Jews. They were not part of the people God chose and through whom He was bringing salvation. The Magi were from an outside group, the Gentiles, and yet they wanted to **worship** Jesus. God had given them some light in their search for the truth and they were responding to that light in the right way.

As we already know, Herod's response was something else entirely. Herod was also not a Jew. He was an Idumean. He was the king of the Jews and he wanted to keep them as happy as he could without risking his authority or crown. He also wanted to make a name for himself and he was happy to use the Jews and his appointment in Judea to do it, as best he could. In a way, he was successful. We still know who he was and we are talking about him this morning. He was appointed by Rome, and so his loyalty was there, yet he still listened to his Jewish advisors and sought to lead the Jewish people.

All this meant that **Herod** was familiar with the Jewish law and the prophets. He had read much of what we call the Old Testament. His advisors were steeped in it having been raised in Judea and the Jewish culture. As Matthew wrote, *"When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked*

them where the Christ was to be born." (v.4) If the Magi had a little light from God, Herod lived in the floodlight. Yet, when he heard of Jesus' birth, instead of being overjoyed at the birth of the Messiah, he was disturbed. He wondered if the boy would grow up to take the throne from his own son. He wondered if the popular hope for a new king in the line of David would rise up again and cause him more trouble. After all, as I said, Herod was not a Jew, and the promise of a Jewish king having been born could have led to problems for his own reign if the news got out to the general population.

So, the Magi traveled months to see Jesus and worship Him. Herod was only several hours away, yet he stayed put and sent the Magi to investigate for him. In sending them, he boldly lied to them. He told them, *"Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."* (v.8) Of course, we know from verse twelve, and verse sixteen in the next passage, that Herod meant to do no such thing. Herod wanted to **destroy** Jesus, not worship Him. He wanted Jesus out of the way. Herod thought he was in charge, at least in Judea, and he would not tolerate any threat to that authority or to his plans for greatness in the future. The birth of a popular new king did both.

In today's world we still have two responses. The world today is generally not as aggressive against Jesus as Herod was. This is especially true in our culture where we have a strong Christian history and ethical basis. The people around us do not flat out reject Him as much. **Our** rejection of Jesus is much more subtle. We call Him a good teacher or prophet, but we don't really

pay attention to the things He said, or, more often, we pick and choose the things we want to believe and follow.

Many years ago I was responsible for putting together the Ministerium services. One year, as I was putting together the Baccalaureate service for the high school I had a meeting with the students who had volunteered to participate in the service. One of them volunteered to read and so I asked if she would read a passage from one of the Gospels. I don't remember which passage it was, only that it was a section of Jesus' teaching. She said she wanted to read it first to make sure she agreed with it before she decided! Here was a high school senior who had volunteered to take place in a worship service and she was going to sit in judgement over Jesus' teaching and would only read publicly what she could approve. I admire her integrity. I fear for her eternal destiny and the destiny of the people and society that taught her to put her opinion of what is right or wrong over God's word.

This problem is not only out in the world. I have even run into this tendency to try to change Jesus into what we want Him to be in the church. A few years later I had a member of this church, one of the leaders at the time, call me to express her dismay at something she had read in the Bible. She could not believe Jesus' statement in Luke 14:26: "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.*" She said to me, "Certainly Jesus didn't mean this, did He? Why would the people that translated this use such language? My **Jesus** would never say

anything like that!" Without even realizing it, this woman had put herself in the same position as that high school student. She did not like what Jesus had to say, and instead of looking at her relationship with Him and her relationships with the members of her family in light of Jesus' teaching, she just rejected it. She was left to call me to learn why she could ignore the passage as a translation error. Of course, I told her it was not an error, and while Jesus was using hyperbolic language, He really did mean it.

Both of these people exhibited the modern equivalent to Herod's response. Jesus and His teaching disturbed the world in which they live so they sought to find ways around them. The first denied who Jesus is, accepting Him as a great, but imperfect teacher. The second thought she accepted Him and hoped to learn how the church had distorted His teaching, only to learn the church hadn't. Her last (and most adamant) sentence is the most telling. She worships a Jesus she has made for herself, not the one we find in the scripture. These are subtle rejections, but rejections nonetheless, of Who Jesus is and what He **expects** of us.

Just as there was when Jesus was born and the Magi made their long journey, there are two options today. We have seen those who, like Herod, reject Jesus and choose to go their own way. The other option is to join the Magi in their example. "*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*" (v.11) When the Magi saw Jesus they did not seek to fit Him into the mold of what they

thought He ought to be. They accepted Him for who He is and they bowed down before Him and worshiped Him. They demonstrated in their actions that Jesus, even though He was only a little boy at the time, was worthy of their adoration and loyalty. The Magi gave **Jesus** their worship and the best gifts they could bring. These men left, and we do not know what their lives looked like after the dream that sent them home by a different route, but for the time their lives are recorded they did the right thing and welcomed the incarnate God into the world in the right way.

It is our responsibility to bend our knees and bow our heads before Who Jesus really is, not to try to make Him into what and who we want Him to be. Like the Magi we are to acknowledge Jesus' **authority** over us, bow our will to His, and give Him the best that we have. This is a real contrast to the way the world treats Him. It is a real contrast to the way our fallen sinful natures want to go. It is the way the new natures He has placed in us strive to go. It is the way the Holy Spirit seeks to lead us every moment of every day.