

The Sunday of the Epiphany, January 5 2014. Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-2.  
The visit of the Wise Men. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Welcome to "Son of Christmas Eve, Part 2"!! In the Latin Churches – the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, UCC, Baptist and most independent Protestant Churches, we celebrate the Christ's birth on December 24/25. In the Orthodox Churches that celebration happens on the Day of the Epiphany (which we're celebrating today).

That means (for us, of course) that we get to celebrate Christmas twice!

The readings are different, though, aren't they?! Today we get the visitors – "Kings" as one carol names them; "Wise men" according to the NRSV translation; "Magoi" in the original Greek.

How many Magoi? I first asked this question about six years ago. We don't know - 3 is a guess based on the gifts. Who where they? Well, the text says "Wise Men", and some take that to mean "Philosophers", but that would be like calling George Washington a soldier – and nothing else.

In a culture where religion and politics were inseparably linked together, "Magoi" were political-religious advisors to the powerful leaders – kings. They held prominent places in their own societies, perhaps second only to Royalty.

That means that these figures who Matthew describes aren't just a bunch of wandering "wise men" but representatives of other societies outside of – and not subject to – the Roman Empire, let alone a minor client-king in a backwater province of that Empire such as Israel.

So here, you could say, is the rest of the world, come to pay homage. These are not your 'run-of-the-mill' visitors – these are very important people. No wonder Herod was nervous!

If you were to study the history of the period you'd discover that the Magoi resisted the imperialistic designs of Phillip the Macedonian and his son Alexander the Great to conquer the ancient Near Eastern people.

In other words, they represent political and religious resistance to imperialism – they were symbols of the struggle against the oppression of empires. Everyone in the Near East – including everyone in the Kingdom of Herod the Great – would be very aware of the enormous significance of the Magoi had in that struggle.

And now, Matthew tells us, they show up at the manger to pay their respects – more, their "homage" to Jesus, a new leader for a people subjugated by an Empire. It's not hard to see that anyone in a position of power in the Roman Empire would see that as an overt threat....and in that day and age the way you eliminated a threat was to "terminate it with extreme prejudice!" You killed the person or persons and, if possible, all of their followers, too.

It's hard to check the historicity of the Slaughter of the Innocents, but it is exactly what Herod would have done to make sure that the one the Magoi came to visit was no threat to him.

What made the Magoi's actions worse, what added insult to injury, was that Matthew's gospel interprets the visit of the Magoi as saying that liberation from foreign Roman domination has come *not from the elite but* rather from *the poor and humble in a hamlet* (Bethlehem) of a rather *insignificant principality* (Judea)." (Pilch) From the very beginning, Matthew reminds us, Jesus is a political figure, a threat to the elites, to the establishment, to the normal way of doing business.

From the very beginning, Jesus overturns the normal way of things.

We know the rest of the story. He continues to overturn things, he continues to raise up the lowly, to bring good news to the poor, to widows and orphans, to proclaim God's justice with equity.

And it will be the last thing – in his lifetime, at least – that he overturns – the tables of the money-changers in the Temple precincts (a symbol for the domination system of rich over poor, strong over weak if ever there was one), it will be the overturning of the moneychangers' tables that finally gets him crucified.

That's one part of this story of Epiphany, and a very significant part, at that.

There's another part.

We Christians have, quite rightly, overlaid the visit of the Magoi with Christian tradition and liturgy; we have understood this event through engaging symbolism and rich interpretations. That is good and helpful for all of us.

As we enter the Epiphany season

1. we see in Isaiah's proclamation the announcing of the season of illumination, highlighting God's revelation to all humanity.
2. We see, in parallel with the political implications of the Magoi's visit, a profound theological statement that now all Creation can, through this child, experience God's glory.
3. We hear the good news, long awaited, that God continues to act through God's revealing light
4. and we see a challenge to self-interested and nationalistic political leaders, a challenge that is truly good news for all humanity.

In other words, both parts of this story – the political and the theological – are necessary for us fully to understand Epiphany. We can't allow either part of the story to overwhelm the other – if we do so we end up with a Jesus who is either a political revolutionary or a disembodied God figure completely out of touch with the real world....**We need both parts of this story.**

We need to be engaged as Christians in the worship and prayer of the Body of Christ, the Church, where we encounter the true light which, John's gospel reminds us, came into the world in Jesus.

And we need to be engaged as Christians in the plain history, the real stories, the every day ups and downs of human beings going about their lives – engaged, actively, vocally, intentionally.

For if we are not engaged in both of these ways then we're really not living fully into our identity as pilgrims following in our Master's footsteps.

As Walter Bruggemann has said: “[In Epiphany] the way beyond is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, [and] a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares.”

May that be our Epiphany journey.                      Amen.