

A few years ago, I was approached by someone who was going through the RCIA process (the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) with a question. They had recently learned of the Real and True Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, and what a great and miraculous gift it was that we were able to receive this each time we came to Mass. This person said, 'well I don't know how to ask this, but I sometimes watch Catholics going to communion....and I was wondering....is there some rule that they have to look unhappy when they come to receive Communion?'

Quite often we don't see or stop recognizing great things in our own midst; it happens time and again in our Church; but it also happens in our communities or workplaces, even in our own homes and families....we expect that greatness comes from somewhere outside, and that which is within while, a 'good effort' is not something that we see as 'great' or 'earth shattering' because perhaps we're too close to it to recognize the effect it has on others.....

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany; the occasion recorded for us in the Gospel of St. Matthew, when magi, or wise men, from foreign lands, traveled to Bethlehem – they were following a star which had appeared, and which, to their science and learning and wisdom of the time, would indicate something of tremendous importance to the entire world – most likely the birth of a great King, or someone even greater. The Magi, scholars tell us, most likely traveled from Persia, which is modern day Iraq, and were learned men. They were possibly of great importance, as the Gospel records they had a private audience with King Herod; not something ordinary 'scientists' would have been invited to. In their culture and time they were well educated, and were drawn by their knowledge and obvious dedication to their studies to travel to see the outcome or result of this wonder in the heavens. Here we have an early example that science and religion are not polar opposites...God created all things, and in the natural world, uses it to draw those with open minds who seek the real Truth, closer to Himself. He draws the Magi from their own lands and brings them to Bethlehem, where He reveals Himself to them through the Sacred Scriptures in prophecy, and in the person of Jesus Christ. And despite what their science and studies have taught them, despite what their religious practices were prior to that moment, the Gospel says, 'they knelt down and paid him homage.'.....they

worshipped Him. This theme of foreigners, of non-Jews, of Gentiles being drawn into relationship with God is spoken of in prophecy by Isaiah in our first reading, “nations shall come to Your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn...”. More than 700 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah writes of how all nations will be coming to God through His Messiah – that it will not be salvation for Israel alone, but for the whole human race. St. Paul too picks up this theme, writing for the Ephesians, when he says, ‘the Gentiles have become heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus.’

Here was the promised Messiah, the promise God had made through His prophets and Sacred Scripture, and he was largely unrecognized, unappreciated, and rejected by those in His own country and culture, who should have been the ones to recognize who He was in their midst. St. Matthew almost screams this out in his writing of his Gospel, particularly from the beginning – he backs up each mention of a circumstance of Jesus conception, birth, the visits of the magi, all of it, with references to what the prophets said in scripture earlier....in this particular Gospel passage for example, speaking of his birthplace, St. Matthew quotes the prophet Micah, ‘and you, Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’....time and again, in His gospel, written for a Jewish audience, St. Matthew is saying ‘See...we should have know right from the beginning that Jesus was the one promised by God – the prophets all pointed to him, his life bore out what the prophets said about him...right from the beginning; and because he was humble and in our midst, we never saw who he truly was....it was those from outside, from foreigners, from Gentiles that those who worshipped Him first came from.’

There was someone though, in Israel, who was open to the possibility that the child born in Bethlehem was truly of great importance. And this is where we have one of the greatest contrasts in the Scriptures; of the opposing choices that everyone faces with the possibility the Christ has entered into our world and into our lives; in contrast to the homage paid to the new-born King of kings by the magi, we have the reaction of King Herod, the great.

Unlike the rest of the nation at the time of his Jesus birth, who largely ignored him, and unlike the Gentiles, the non-Jews who are the first in Matthew's Gospel to worship Christ, King Herod seeks to destroy Jesus.

Now before anyone listens to some modern day secularists, who suggest St. Matthew just inserted this 'story' into his Gospel for dramatic effect, we have to consider the historical record that coincides with the time of the gospels and this event in the life of our Savior.

Herod's family ruled in Palestine from about 40 BC until the late 50's AD. They were Arabs who had converted to Judaism, and ruled the territory with the permission of Rome. Through political maneuvering, Herod had achieved the power he had, and was a close ally of the Emperor Augustus. Historians of the time, among them Josephus, and Tacitus, as well as other writers, provide us with an image of Herod; he was paranoid, power-hungry and absolutely ruthless; although he was Jewish by conversion, whenever he acted contrarily to the laws of their religion, if the Pharisees were bold enough to point this out, Herod would simply execute them by the dozens. He would go to lengths to prove to the Romans that he could be just as merciless as they were, crucifying scores of people on the outside walls of his palace. Herod even had one of his wives executed, along with some of his young sons on separate occasions; and their crime? He feared they were more popular than he was. Herod sought permission from Rome at one point in writing, to execute two of his sons, which caused the Emperor Augustus himself to comment, "I would rather be Herod's pig than one of his sons..."

But Herod was a builder too, constructing a great fortress at Masada, and of course, rebuilding the great Temple in Jerusalem, a project which would take 46 years to complete. But we have to look at his motives; Herod, the convert, raising a great edifice that people would marvel at, come to and no doubt, recognize him for building; it was a way for him, so he thought, to control God too – to use God and worship of Him to keep his own subjects happy and to place his own people in the religious leadership to solidify his influence. Trying to bend God to his will, rather than surrendering his will to God's.

The trouble was, now the prophecies pointed to this unknown child in Bethlehem coming as God's promised Messiah who would lead, not only Israel, but all people. The problem was that Herod, like the rest

of the leadership of Israel, didn't understand that the Messiah was not to be a political ruler, but something far greater. And because he didn't understand that, that he feared his grasp on power and his personal ambitions would be lost, rather than try to be open to what God's will was for him, Herod sought to destroy the child, through what we have come to call the massacre of the innocents, all of the boys in Bethlehem two years and under.

The irony is that while Herod is in the middle of His tremendous project of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem – a temple of bricks and mortar where the inner Holy of Holies was where the glory of God was believed to dwell – here he was plotting and attempting to destroy the living Temple of God in the person of Jesus, the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.....because the call to holiness for all people, to return to God, did not fit in with Herod's [personal plans, ambitions and insecurities.....]

For all of us, it really comes down to these choices; we can ignore Christ among us as most of Israel did at His birth- and as our consumerist society tells us to do today; we can reject and seek to destroy any influence He has in our lives as Herod did –as our modern relativist and secular societies do; or we can seek Him out in faith and reason – as the magi did- and worship and pay homage to Him when we discover Him in our midst. When we have the opportunity to recognize, to approach, to worship Him, particularly in His Church and His Sacraments, we can do so with joy and the awe of that Epiphany – of that discovery that we know with our minds and can feel in the depths of our hearts...that Christ, His Church and His Sacraments are wonders and miracles and glories that we are given and can approach each and every day of our lives.