

King Herod and the Wise Men - A Christmas Challenge



The Christmas story is surely one of the greatest stories ever told. It chronicles a birth from which the world records time as before or after. Moreover, it is written in a way that has inflamed the romantic imagination for 2000 years. This hasn't always been for the good. Beyond spawning every kind of legend imaginable, the story of Christmas has, in the Christian imagination, too often taken on a centrality not accorded to it in the Gospels themselves. This is not surprising, given its richness.

Inside its great narrative there are multiple mini-narratives, each of which comes laden with its own archetypal symbols. One of these mini-narratives, rich in archetypal imagery, is the story King Herod and the wise men.

We see this in the Gospel of Matthew when he tells us how various people reacted to the announcement of Jesus' birth. Matthew sets up a powerful archetypal contrast, blessing and curse, between the reaction of the wise men, who bring their gifts and place them at the feet of the new king, and King Herod, who tries to kill him.

We are all familiar with this story since it has been much celebrated in song, icon, and legend. Jesus is born inside of a religious tradition, Judaism, and his birth is announced to that faith-community in a manner that befits religion, namely, by the angels, by supernatural revelation. But those outside of that

faith-tradition need another way to get to know of his birth, and so his birth is announced to them though nature, astrology, through the stars. The wise men see a special star appear in the sky and begin to follow it, not knowing exactly to where or to what it will lead.

While following the star, they meet King Herod who, upon learning that a new king has supposedly been born, has his own evil interest in matter. He asks the wise men to find the child and bring him back information so that he, too, can go and worship the newborn. We know the rest of story:

The wise men follow the star, find the new king, and, upon seeing him, place their gifts at his feet. What happens to them afterwards? We have all kinds of apocryphal stories about their journey back home, but these, while interesting, are not helpful. We do not know what happened to them afterwards and that is exactly the point. Their slipping away into anonymity is a crucial part of their gift. The idea is that they now disappear because they can now disappear. They have placed their gifts at the feet of the young king and can now leave everything safely in his hands. His star has eclipsed theirs. Far from fighting for their former place, they now happily cede it to him. Like old Simeon, they can happily exit the stage singing: Now, Lord, you can dismiss your servants! We can die! We're in safe hands!

And Herod, how much to the contrary! The news that a new king has been born threatens him at his core since he is himself a king. The glory and light that will now shine upon the new king will no longer shine on him. So what is his reaction? Far from laying his resources at the feet of the new king, he sets out to kill him. Moreover, to ensure that his murderers find him, he kills all the male babies in the entire area. An entire book on anthropology might be written about this last line. Fish are not the only species that eats its young! But the real point is the contrast between the wise men and Herod: The former see new life as promise and they bless it; the latter sees new life as threat and he curses it.

This is a rich story with a powerful challenge: What is my own reaction to new life, especially to life that threatens me, that will take away some of my own popularity, sunshine, and adulation? Can I, like the wise men, lay my gifts at the feet of the young and move towards anonymity and eventual death, content that the world is in good hands, even though those hands are not my hands? Or, like Herod, will I feel that life as a threat and I try somehow to kill it, lest its star somehow diminish my own?

To bless another person is to give away some of one's own life so that the other might be more resourced for his or her journey, Good parents do that for their children. Good teachers do that for their students, good mentors do that for their protégés, good pastors do that for their parishioners, good politicians do that for their countries, and good elders do that for the young. They give away some of their own lives to resource the other. The wise men did that for Jesus.

How do we react when a young star's rising begins to eclipse our own light?

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