

Whose Christmas is it, anyway?  
Matthew 2:1-2

This story from Matthew's Gospel is familiar to Christians and non-Christians all over the world. For many years we have heard how the Wise Men came from the East, following the mysterious star, how they stopped to see Herod, and then continued their trip until they got to Bethlehem. There they saw for the first time, the baby, the Christ, the King. They worshipped him, giving him gifts that set back even wealthy people quite a bit.

There are a number of unanswered questions in this story. Who were these men, these Magi, and where did they live? Why didn't Herod go with them when he learned from his scholars that a king was born right down the road in Bethlehem? Just what was the star that brought the wise men all the way from one country to another? We can speculate about the answers, but even if we come up with the most likely answers, there is still a sense of mystery surrounding this story.

But one point of the story is very clear. These travelers, with their gifts, acknowledged that this baby was Lord.

The baby had a right to be king. He had the right ancestors. The visit of the wise men was almost like his coronation. Psalm 72 contains an important prophesy about this event. It tells us that the promised king would receive great tribute, and that he would show great concern and care for the poor and dispossessed. It says:

"The kings of Tarshish and of the islands will pay him tribute. The kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts; all kings will do him homage, all nations become his servants. He will free the poor man who calls to him, and those who need help, he will have pity on the poor and feeble, and save the lives of those in need: he will redeem their lives from exploitation and outrage, their lives will be precious in his sight."

The words of the Psalm fit today's Gospel like a glove. Both announce the arrival of a most unusual king. This someone who is worshipped, one who gets very expensive presents, who establishes his kingdom by helping the poor, the needy, the exploited, and the outraged. The Bible points out, time after time, that in God's scheme of things, those in power have a responsibility to be on the side of the poor, the dispossessed, and the hopeless.

This Jesus--both the king and the servant-- was certainly on the side of the poor. Remember how Jesus said his "woes" to those in authority who were not taking care of dependent people. Jesus make it clear that widows and homeless children were to be cared for, not neglected; that the naked were to be clothed, not ignored; that those in prison were to be visited, not forgotten; that the hungry were to be fed, not left to starve; that women were to be treated as human beings, not property; that children were important. In fact, adults could imitate their faith! Jesus left little doubt that his kingdom was a most unusual kingdom.

Is it different for us, who live 2000 years later? There is another story in Matthew's gospel where Jesus allows a woman to anoint him with an expensive anointment. The disciples were steamed! They thought it could have been sold, and the money given to the poor. Jesus says to the disciples, "You have the poor with you always, but you will not always have me." Jesus was not suggesting that the poor SHOULD always be with us. He was only telling us that they would always be. He acknowledged a sad fact of our local, national, and world condition -- that there are and will be poor people. But for Jesus it did not end there. He acknowledged the condition of poverty by living His life as a response to suffering, poverty, oppression, and corruption in low and high places.

There are countless opportunities for the King's subjects, for us, to acknowledge him as king. We pay him homage in our worship, in our speaking the good news to others, and in our giving to those who are dedicated to serving the poor. Our witnessing in this world involves a double thrust: proclaiming the

gospel of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ first, and providing for the needs of those who have problems that seem to overwhelm them.

Jesus was a most unusual king right from the beginning, when the strangers from the east followed a star to Bethlehem, all the way to the end when the King was crowned with a most unusual crown-- not gold, not jewels, in fact nothing valuable, but with a crown made of thorny vines designed to penetrate his scalp, to cut into his head so that blood would cover his face. The king endured that for us-- people who by nature are too spiritually poor to meet his expectations. That includes every one of us. For all have sinned. We are found wanting in God's sight. But the pain of that crown was not the end for him. It was only the beginning. He was marched to skull hill, attached to a cross in a most vicious way. He was left hanging in the heat of the day, and finally pronounced dead.

Why? That is the great question even his followers did not know at the time. Hindsight is always better. We have it-- his first disciples did not. The great WHY is answered: He was a most unusual king with a most unusual kingdom. He established his kingdom for us because we could not establish it for ourselves. The great light of Epiphany highlights the Good News that Jesus did it for us. And to make sure it was sealed and acceptable to God, he rose on Easter morning.

It all started with his coronation in Bethlehem; it was lived out in the way he served people, and it ended (or at least it appeared that way) on old skull hill.

But it did not end there. The baby of Bethlehem and the servant of the people is our risen Lord and Savior who now reigns in glory.

That's whom we worship, just like the early wise men did. We worship him with our psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and we worship him when we help our brothers and sisters in need.

We climaxed our Christmas celebration on Christmas Eve. We gathered on Christmas Eve, because we put on our Jewish watches as we eagerly await the birthday of the Prince of Peace. Since the Jewish day starts at sundown, our Christmas Eve is really a part of Christmas Day, which would end at sundown. If we would have been able to interview all those who came to the manger scene that first Christmas night, we would no doubt have found that 100% of the shepherds, and any other locals were children of Abraham. They wanted to worship the newborn King of the Jews, and he was that.

No mention is made of any non-Jewish people worshipping the child until Matthew tells us about these wise men. Unabashedly Gentile, many had never even seen a Jew, much less met one or worshipped one. On the day of Epiphany, the Christchild is finally worshipped by the Gentiles.

Whose Christmas is it, anyway? Do we have to be Jewish to be in church on December 24 or 25? Do we have to be eastern or orthodox to call this day the Gentile Christmas? The baby came just once. He was born to Mary on only one day, not two. It took us Gentiles a little longer to get into this worship of the Christchild thing, but our worship is not second class or despised when it is directed to the God who sends the Christ to take care of our sin problem.

It was our Christmas, and it was theirs. The baby is their Savior, and he is ours. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. In Christ, we are one. In his name we have salvation. Amen.

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