

What Matthew gives here is not an account of an episode from the infancy of Jesus, as it might seem at first sight. Rather it is a reflection on the kingly identity of the newborn child. It anticipates, in veiled form, an explanation of the rejection he will experience later. Jesus is the long-awaited descendent of David whose sovereignty was recognised in Israel from the beginning with the help of Scripture. Even though the Scriptures foretold his coming in great detail, it was not sufficient for him to be accepted. The people who set out in search of him were people from afar who did not know where to find him. Those nearby were disinterested and left the initiative to pagans. The gentiles availed of every heavenly clue that put them on the road to God-with-us. Their obedience was in sharp contrast to the closed minds of the Jews who knew where God was expected to appear, but did not think it worth their while to go to see him. Matthew wrote, not out of mere sentimentality, but to give a serious warning. Knowing who Jesus is and where he is to be found, does not necessarily lead to faith or the adoration he merits. And this can lead to losing him. Is it not true that even in our own day, the people who continue to search for Jesus, and come laden with gifts, are often those who are furthest away and know least about him? This is not simply a story about people who did not know Jesus but came in search of him. It is a warning that anyone who takes God's presence for granted, and does not go in search of him, will lose him. For the search to be authentic, we do not have to come with gifts, or wishes to be satisfied. We can search for God even if we are confused, but we must have something to offer.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ² "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ `And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'" ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; ⁸ and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; ¹¹ and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

I. Read: understand what the text is saying, focussing on how it says it

Matthew has already given his account of the birth of the Messiah at Bethlehem. Now, with the episode of the wise men from the east, he wants to publicize the event. It is no longer angels who announce to shepherds the good news that the King of the Jews is born (as we read in Luke, 2,8-20), but strangers who have come from afar led by a star. The facts related have the semblance of truth – the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem during the last years of King Herod, and the popular belief that the appearance of new stars was a sign of some significant event in history and of the birth of an important person. The account is drawn up, however, in a way that serves the writer's purpose: it is only those who come from afar who know that Israel has already received the Messiah. They are the ones who look for him to adore him, even though they do not know who he is or where he is to be found. Right from the beginning of his appearance on earth, we witness the tragic destiny of Jesus Christ – to be ignored by his own and sought by strangers. His public revelation and public rejection go hand in hand.

The wise men and Herod are the main actors in this episode. The wise men are guided by a star that gives only a little light, yet they are the ones who tell Herod, King of the Jews, about the birth of the new king. Herod and his scribes were familiar with the Scriptures. They knew where he was to be born, but they had no intention of going to look for him. The contrast could hardly be more obvious! The wise men set out guided by a star, but motivated by their desire to adore the Jewish Messiah, and they ask help of anyone who can give it. Even though Herod and his wise men were familiar with the Scriptures and knew the place where he lived, they made no move, but they were alarmed nonetheless. Knowing that the Messiah was born filled them, not with joy, but with fear. Salvation is frightening for those who do not desire it.

While Herod had the word of God and experts to interpret it for him, the wise men had only a star that sometimes disappeared. They had to ask, but they never stopped seeking. The star showed them the way and the place they were looking for. Anyone who searches for God to adore him will always have a star to lead him to God. It will even serve as a guide to those who do not believe, or are not interested in the fact that the Messiah is born.

It is worth noting that they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” before their meeting with the child and Mary, his mother. They experienced joy during the search, even before their meeting with the child. It is also worth noting that gifts were given only after they adored him - the more we give the less it costs to give, and the more adorable the Lord becomes. It is very significant that Jesus was found close to his mother. (There is no mention here of Joseph, even though he is mentioned in the earlier account of the birth of Jesus). Jesus is never far away from where Mary is.

II. Meditate: apply what the text says to life

The story of the adoration by the wise men completes the account of the incarnation of God, which is the mystery we are celebrating in this Christmas season. The Christian people remember the gifts that Jesus received from strangers by giving gifts to children and close friends. However, what Christians really celebrate today is the first revelation of Jesus to the pagan world. The wise men are not the reason for our celebration. God is - God who wants to reveal himself to those who seek him. God's incarnation would have been in vain if he had been recognised only by his parents. It would have been of little use if Mary and Joseph had been the only ones to receive the son that God had given them, if the world of the shepherds from nearby and the wise men from afar had not recognised his existence. The arrival of strangers in Bethlehem, laden with gifts and desiring to worship him, signals the beginning of the accomplishment of salvation. Jesus wanted to stop being the son of Mary and Joseph only, to become the Messiah of Israel and Saviour of the world.

These men who came from the East can teach us many things. They looked for Jesus by following a star, and they enquired of him from all they met along the way. The desire to adore him prompted them to leave their country. They were not satisfied just to know that he had been born. Once they discovered the star, they followed it and they did not stop until they reached him. They asked help of people who knew more than they did, even though they had little interest in seeing him.

They continued to search the sky for the light that led them to the place where he was born. Their desire to adore him was so great that the gifts they were carrying to honour him did not seem heavy. Everything was worthwhile if it helped them to see God. The strange thing is that it was these men, strangers in Israel, who were the only ones interested in knowing where they could find the king of the Jews.

This gospel account is not just a children's story. It is the story of a tragedy. It is not just about what happened one day long ago. It describes what is still happening in our day. People close to God engage in interminable discussions, while those far away are in a hurry to find him. Powerful people plot against him even though they hardly know him. Modern Herods pretend to be interested in his birth, but only to cover up their murderous intent. None of the believers in Israel move to meet him. Only some pagans continue their journey in search of him. Finding him and being able to adore him was the great good fortune of the wise men. Refusing to look for him was, and still is, the great sin of the learned. The wise men's lack of knowledge of God gave them reason to search for him. Those who knew where he was to be born made no effort to get to know him. Those furthest away were the most generous. These good pagans turned out to be the best believers. When they found him, they did not ask for anything. Their only desire was to adore the Messiah sent by God.

Even today, people are still coming from afar to adore our God. We who are believers think we are close to God. We engage in discussions about where we can find him, but we do not

have the courage to set out in search of him. It is to our shame that we are away behind the pagans who come laden with gifts to offer when they meet him, while we who believe have all kinds of difficulties. We have to have something to ask for, before we set out in search of God.

We think we know where he is and how we can meet him, and so we don't bother to search for him. Because we lack the desire to adore him, we miss out on this small adorable God, as the people of Bethlehem did.

It is no excuse for us to say that we have not seen a star, as the Wise men did, nor is it a valid excuse to say we have nothing to offer him. All we need to go in search of him is the wish to know him and a burning desire to adore him. The fact is that God was able to reveal himself to the world because there were people who went in search of him. The wonder is that God was adored by pagans and not by believers, by strangers who came from afar and not by the local people who made no effort to meet him.

At Bethlehem, God appeared as an adorable infant, but only those who had made an effort to find him were able to adore him. It will be of little benefit to us to celebrate this feast today, if we do not pay attention to the risk we are running every day by not going in search of him.

It does not matter if we do not know exactly where he is waiting for us. The value of the gifts we bring does not matter either. The God of the crib wants us to see him as a God to be adored. He has given us enough stars in our lives to guide us to where he is waiting for us, and there will always be people along the way for us to ask. What really matters is whether or not we have the desire to adore this God who comes to us as a vulnerable infant.

This is the God whom strangers went in search of, before whom the wise men fell down in adoration, the God to whom they were led by the star of Bethlehem, and whom they found as an infant with his mother Mary. There, where the star stopped, God was waiting for them. Because they were not scandalized or shocked to find that the Messiah they were looking for was a newborn child, these pagans became the first believers in the God of the incarnation. This child, the son of Mary, was the first revelation of God and, for this reason, Christian people see in the child an image of God. This is why it is fitting to celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord by paying special attention to little children. We cannot forget that God came hidden as a child, and that he revealed himself as God for the first time in the son of Mary. God reveals himself to us in the faces of little children, our sons and daughters.

Today we celebrate the God who wants to be adored at Bethlehem as a little child. We should ask ourselves how is it that we Christians are making our families, our cities and our society an unwelcoming place for children. In a world where children are unwanted, God is missing. Our society and our families are pagan when they do not adore God and his Son.

We neglect to adore God present in children, not only when we do not allow them to be born, but also when we abandon them after birth or abuse and ill-treat them.

We condemn ourselves if we do not meet the God of Jesus, if we continue to remain insensitive to the needs of children who are incapable of defending themselves, and if we fail to see in them the adorable face of our God. We are becoming pagan without realizing it, if, in our society, the child is no longer desired and adored. Our world is putting its future at risk, and we believers risk losing our faith.