

A MATTER OF TRUST

Who were they--- these travelers from the East, who sometime after the birth of the baby arrive in Bethlehem with expensive gifts? They appear for a moment and are quickly gone. The text calls them wise men. They are known variously as magi, astrologers, astronomers, philosophers, mystics or scientists whose interests stretched far beyond Israel. Tradition has assigned them names and races. The scripture identifies the three gifts they brought, leading us to assume there were three wise men.

But who they were, where they came from or what they were about remain buried in the mists of history and legend. Like all of us at our best, they were on a quest, hungry for light in a dark world, eager to find that which was greater than themselves. Their story is more than a pleasant tale though. If they had trusted Herod, Caesar's puppet king, history might have been very different. But they instead trusted a voice which came to them in a dream.

Herod had gotten wind of their coming, and summoned his staff to talk with them. The notion that another king was about to surface was not good news to Herod. Those with power do not easily give it up for religious or for any other reasons. Herod had his agenda, and anyone who tried to get in its way would feel his sword.

Ancient texts, said his staff, held that the new king would sit on David's throne in David's city. Bethlehem was just a few miles south of Jerusalem. No need to panic. Herod could dispatch whatever force necessary when the facts were clearer. "Go and find this new king," he had privately said to the wise men. "And when you locate him let me know so that I too may come and worship him."

So off they go and when the Magi arrive in Bethlehem they inquire as to recent exceptional births. Perhaps they encounter some shepherds with a strange and wonderful story. Whatever it was they subsequently visit the child. By this time mother and babe have left the stable and are in a house. There the visitors offer their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Having completed their mission they are ready to head home. The oily voice of Herod sticks in their minds. They do not return to Jerusalem. A dream, warning them not to return to Herod, confirms their disease. They take a back road out of town, and make their way across the desert.

Their dream was right, as was their intuition. Herod was not to be trusted. He had tried to enlist them in his cause, but they had resisted. Powerful people intent on violence often try to co-opt religion. Every king, or president or chairman wants the blessing of God on whatever war is at hand. I cannot think of a single time when military strongmen were unconcerned about what religious leaders thought. And most of the time the

religious leaders feel it their patriotic duty to support what the leaders ask. More blood has been spilled in religious wars and crusades than in any other cause. In those rare times when the church will not and does not support the aims of the government, prosecuting a war becomes very difficult. The Vietnam War became impossible when religious people—young and old—said “NO.”

The wise men follow their dream and return home. Herod does not get their support, and is furious. Joseph, told of Herod’s anger by an angel, packs up his little family and makes tracks for Egypt. One wonders if the magi were God’s angels in this case.

Herod realizes he has been deceived by the wise men and in his rage dispatches the troops. He must find and destroy this new king. What level of force does he use? Far more than it would take to kill one baby. War is a tricky matter. The bible tells us that to be sure he gets the right one; every male child under the age of two is murdered. All that slaughter for no purpose, for the object of the massacre escapes.

We might later ask, “Was it worth it Herod? The death of all those children; the dismantling of all those lives; the destruction and terror you produced? Was it worth it?” His response would probably be, “Yes it was worth the cost. One of those children—the one we didn’t get, sad to say—was a danger to our security. We had to do what we had to do.” That’s easy for Herod to say. Herod didn’t have to pay the price. The families of Bethlehem paid. Innocent babies paid. The land ran with their blood—not Herod’s.

It is always easy for political leaders to justify this act of violence or that. But what of those thousands who come every month to a wall in Washington – that great monument on which are inscribed the names of over 40,000 men and women who died in a war that never should have been. If you have been there you know the ritual—not written down anywhere, but almost automatic. Someone walks along the path, tense and anxious. They are looking for a name. When they find it, there are tears. They slowly make their way to the face of the wall and with their fingers caress the name, letter by letter—as if to touch it establishes some contact with the one for whom the name stands. Then reaching into a pocket, finding a scrap of paper, they make a simple pencil tracing, until each indentation takes shape and the name is transferred to the paper.

This child Herod sought to kill—this pretender to the Judean throne—Herod has good cause to fear him, to want him out of the way. You see, he will bring a new ethic, a new way of doing things to a world enamored with, mired down in, the old ways. He will say, “Turn the other cheek, go the second mile, give good when you get evil.” All the Herods of history will not understand him or what he teaches. Wherever he is followed he will befuddle the powers and the principalities. They may try to use his followers, to enlist them in the cause of blood, but he will always elude them.

His message comes to us in the quiet inner voices which speak of peace and non-violence. And our world so steeped in violence, so ready to prove we are right because we can hit harder than anyone else, cannot hear or understand what he is about or has to say.

He and his messengers—the bible calls them angels—still summon us to a way of living the world does not understand. And we must decide whom we shall hear and whom we shall follow. Shall we trust the voices of the world's Herods? Shall we give over our consciences to those who tell us that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is the only ethic possible? Shall we heed those voices which demand that if we hope to survive we will hit back twice as hard as we hit?

Or shall we listen to another voice which tells us that for some things—the most important questions of life and death—Herod cannot be trusted? Perhaps wise men and women will hear that other voice which calls them to the back roads of life, roads which lead to peace on earth, good will among the world's people.

TO PARAPHRASE HENRY DAVID THOREAU:

If a man—or a woman—does not keep pace with their companions, perhaps it is they hear the voice of a different angel. Let them step to the music which they hear, no matter how measured or far away.

Tell me what you hear and who you are willing to follow. Tell me what you trust—what ethic, what world view, what system. Most of your neighbors will hear that marshal music which justifies the letting of innocent blood when the cause seems right. But there will be a few, one or two here and there, who will hear another voice which comes to them in a dream—a dream of a peaceful world—and will step in time to the beat of that drum. The safety and survival of the world depends, now as it always has, on those who hear and respond to that quieter voice, no matter how measured or far away.