

Sermon for 2 January 2011
Christmas 2, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

What I loved about studying philosophy in college is that the way to succeed, it seemed, was to be clever. Of course, if you tell an undergraduate that he's clever, he'll probably take offence, because he doesn't *mean* to be clever, he *means* to be brilliant. And yet, it's more fun to be merely clever. It's kind of like a game. Cleverness can impress people, can impress oneself, and being clever isn't nearly as time consuming as pursuing something so lofty and oblique as what those old, meddling sages in the theology department called "wisdom".

This morning, I want to explore these two different sorts of intelligence—wisdom and cleverness—as we encounter in this morning's Gospel, as they are personified in two different sets of

characters. Let's start with the former, namely wisdom.

The magi from the East are often called "wise men", and their wisdom is that which enables them to read the signs in the stars to reckon the time and location of the Messiah's birth. We can easily miss the significance of the Magi's inclusion in Matthew's Gospel because our popular image of "we three kings" glosses over the true identity of these men.

There are, of course, plenty of traditions that have popped up through pious legend over the course of the Church's history, which do not necessarily have a biblical basis. The names of the magi—Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar—come from a sixth century Coptic (or Egyptian Christian) legend. There are, in fact, countervailing traditions from Eastern Christianity, my favorite being from the Syriac tradition, if only because the names sound so funny: in Near Eastern Christian churches, the wise men

are still called Larvandang, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas. Furthermore, that they were kings is dubious at best.

Even the number of the magi to which we've become accustomed is an assumption that's not based on the text itself. Nowhere does Matthew's account suggest that there were only three wise men. We know that there were three gifts, and at least two treasure chests in which the gifts were kept (the Greek *thesaurous* or "treasure chest" being in the plural), but there could have been a dozen magi.

As a side note, when we were decorating the church before Christmas, I was trying to figure out which figures from the crèche were shepherds and which were magi. I kept coming up with four magi rather than three (you can see them on the window over there). At first, I thought, I must have been making a mistake, but finally I just assumed that whoever made the crèche was particularly clever

and/or biblically literate by giving us more than the traditional three magi.

So, a lot of what we think we know about the magi is questionable. What we *can* discern from the text, however, is significant, and perhaps a bit shocking. You see, the Greek *magous*, or magi, doesn't just mean "wise men". It means a very specific caste within the religion of Zoroastrianism. It was, in fact, the highest caste, into which Zoroaster himself was born: the priestly caste, as it were.

Now, what I know about Zoroastrianism can be conveyed in about two minutes. What's important for our purposes is that astrology is central to the religion, and this high priestly caste was primarily concerned with figuring out what messages could be gleaned from studying the stars. What most certainly set the magi on their journey was some obscure prophecy that *they* had read in the stars. Indeed, the biblical account doesn't have an angel,

God's preferred method of communication, telling the magi to set out for Bethlehem, but a star, what would have been from the Jewish perspective, a backward, pagan means of discerning messages from idols.

And yet, these men are portrayed as wise and, indeed, reverent. They are filled with joy upon entering the house in which the Holy Family had lodged. They paid homage to the Christ Child. They were, in the end, smart enough to be put off of Herod's trickery. Somehow, the fact that they came to Christ through means we might find (and Jesus' contemporaries surely would have found) theologically suspect, didn't matter so much. It was what they did when they got there, when they arrived in Bethlehem and saw the Christ Child, by which they were justified.

So, the wisdom of the Wise Men, was ultimately not that they were really good at discerning messages in the stars, but that they were open to

the truth of Christ and the direction of God when they finally experienced them. Now keep all this in mind for a couple minutes as we turn to Herod.

I said at the outset that we see two different kinds of intelligence in the morning's Gospel. The magi personify wisdom, and Herod personifies cleverness. Now Herod was, by all accounts, a bad egg. The Roman Emperor Augustus, who was for all intents and purposes Herod's boss, said that he'd rather be Herod's pig than his son, which turned out to be a pretty accurate assessment seeing as how Herod ended up killing his own son.

But one thing that can be said of Herod is that he was awfully clever. He knows how to play the good guy. "Go and search diligently for the child," he tells the magi, "and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." Of course we know Herod's real intentions; we know that when the magi never showed he flew into a rage and had all the children in Bethlehem and the

surrounding countryside under two-years-old killed in the hopes that Jesus would be among them. We know that, but the magi apparently don't get it at first. They don't get it until God's angel warns them. This probably isn't because the magi were dense, but because Herod was so crafty, so clever, that he knew how to keep his real motivations hidden.

And yet, Herod has closed himself off because of fear. He fears that this child stands as a challenge to his rule. For all his cleverness, Herod had not the wisdom to see how great a thing this child's coming could be. So important was the little bit of power he had as a puppet king that he could not leave himself open to experience the power given a child of God.

And this is the real distinction between cleverness and wisdom. A clever person knows the rules of the game, but a wise person will recognize that it's not a game at all. The wise will be open

to experience that for which his dogma does not account, just as the dogma of the magi—the very means by which they found the Christ Child—was turned on its ear by the experience of Him once found. The merely clever cannot break out of his dogma, be it religious dogma or the myth of power to which Herod clung so tightly or any other set of misdirected values which we grasp so tightly.

In the final analysis, wisdom is found by being open to its source, the divine Word, the *logos* of God which we encountered last week in John's prologue. The only way we'll ever be able to give up those petty assumptions which we all permit to rule our lives is by being open to the radical reorientation of values we experience when we abide in that Word, in Christ himself. Opening ourselves to this transformation is foolish by the world's standards, it's not clever, but it's the only way to wisdom.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.