

Ephesians 3:1-12 To the Gentiles
Matthew 2:1-12

Today is Epiphany. For most Christians who observe it, Epiphany refers to the appearance of the Magi from the East, likely Persia, at the home of Mary and Joseph sometime after the birth of Jesus, bearing gifts and bestowing honor on the child. The significance of the visit of the Magi is that right at the beginning, the gospel was announced to the Gentiles. From the start, the gospel was meant for everyone.

Clarifications

Now let me clarify by saying that the gospel and the Christian religions that have resulted from its proclamation should not be equated. Even our way of being Christian, which is dear to me, is very parochial, tied to our culture and history, and is not necessary for others to accept and practice in order to be found faithful.

The “gospel” means much more than that and the news of the day is simply that from the start the followers of Jesus and the earliest believers saw the gospel as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in Genesis,

“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

The Magi represent all the peoples of the earth. In the New Testament this acknowledgment is made in a variety of ways:

1 - In the Gospel of Mark, for instance, Jesus is presented as always crossing back and forth across the lake we call the Sea of Galilee. On the west was the homeland where the Jewish community that raised Jesus lived. On the east was the Roman Decapolis where the Gentiles lived. Jesus healed and fed multitudes on both sides, having compassion on all the people.

2 - In the Gospel of John we read the famous lines of John 3:16 that, “God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten Son, whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” It is for the whole world that Jesus came, and live, and died.

3 - And in the Epistles and Acts, we see Paul as the Apostle to the Gentiles, not requiring them to become Jewish in order to be acceptable to God.

4 - And here on the day when we mark the visit of the Magi, we see that from the birth of Jesus Gentiles received the gospel message.

The Magi

We are all familiar with the story. These Magi (we get the word magic from the same root word), were astrologers of sorts, reading the movements of the stars, when they saw the appearance of a star which signified to them the birth of a king; they decided to travel west in search of the child.

The star led them to Jerusalem where they inquired of the king and his advisors to find out that they did indeed expect a Messiah, who would be born in Bethlehem - so they went there and found Jesus, and gave gifts, and worshipped.

The king, whose name was Herod, had wanted them to report back to him under the pretense that he himself wanted to worship the child, but had actually seen the birth of Jesus as a threat to his power, and desired to harm the child. The Magi, having been warned in a dream, did not report to the king, but returned home by a different route.

There you have it, the whole story wrapped up in a few short lines. It has far-reaching implications, not only for the Magi or for Jesus, but for us and our time too, after all these hundreds of years and the many lifetimes of

Christians practicing the Christian religion, playing our music and singing our songs, building our buildings, taking up offerings, making a business of religion. What does it mean that the gospel is for everyone?

Paul

Paul speaks of it as a mystery, and we would do well to keep that in mind. The mystery is this, "through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus."

It turns out, as reported in the Book of Acts as well as the epistles and the gospels; that this issue of Gentile inclusion by faith was the driving issue from the beginning among the earliest of believers. What I mean is that from the start Gentiles (and that means our ancestors in the faith) were accepting the gospel message, and the movement of Jesus was spreading all around.

Did they need to be required to accept the tenants and practices of Judaism in order to themselves be accepted? The answer was, "no," they did not. In this text we have read from Ephesians, we see that Paul has considered it his life long mission to take the gospel to them and to press for their inclusion.

To this day, we still wrestle with this mystery. There are countless ways that people are divided from one

another; setting Jew and Gentile aside, rich and poor, all the different colors, different religions, different economic and social classes, just differences.

Meaning

The message to us is that because of Christ *we* have been accepted by God and all that is required is that we accept that we have been accepted.

These Persian astrologer/kings have received the gospel message. For them, it meant being spiritually discerning enough to understand the meaning of their dreams, savvy enough to see through Herod's duplicity, and courageous enough to defy him when he asked them to be complicit in his evil.

Though we live in a different time, speak a different language, have different customs, secular and religious, there is a common humanness that connects us all together. The result is that we find a way to be accepting of others, even when it stretches us to the breaking point. It is the foundation not only of our missionary endeavors, but also turned into principles that underlie our political and economic structures.

Sometimes we also are required to be discerning enough to understand, if not our dreams, then whatever way God chooses to speak to us, savvy enough see through the world's duplicity, and

courageous enough to defy those who encourage us to do reject, when we should accept.

The mystery of God's acceptance changes the way we view ourselves and others, no matter what are the other ways the world defines us. *We are neighbors*, and in the end that is all we need to see.

No matter what our failures and the worlds failures may be, this gospel vision still warms the heart, confounds the mind, and inspires the soul with the hope that the blessing promised to Abraham will one day be complete.

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