

**Epiphany – Year C**  
**(Jan. 6, 2007)**

**Wise Men Still Seek Him**

Have you ever visited Washington's National Gallery of Art? If you do you will find there my very favorite painting of the story I just read to you. It's Fra Angelico's Adoration of the Magi, a masterful representation of Matthew's story of the visit of the Wise Men.

In the painting we see large in the foreground the figures of Mary, Joseph, the Infant, and the three Wise Men with their servants bowing down and presenting their gifts. Then behind the Wise Men there is a road that stretches out to the edge of the painting. It seems to go on forever and on that road we see multitudes of people hastening from everywhere to pay homage to this new-born king. It's a marvelous visual representation of the theological significance of the feast we celebrate today. Everyone is coming. Jesus is here for everyone. In that motley throng that crowds the road to Bethlehem we see all sorts of people: kings and commoners, princes and paupers.

To make sure we get the point the artist paints one of the wise men white, one black, and one brown with oriental features.

Luke's nativity story that we heard on Christmas Day tells us about the manifestation of the Savior to his own people, the Jews. Matthew's story is about the manifestation of the Savior to the Gentiles, represented by the Wise Men, his manifestation to the world. It's Matthew's own way of offering a correction to the notion that the Messiah would come only for the Jews, and it was a consolation to the community that Matthew was writing for, largely a Gentile community that knew Jesus was calling them as well.

I've always been struck by the imagery of the story. It's one of the most imaginative in all our Gospels, and paying close attention to the images can help us approach this mystery more prayerfully and more reflectively and also help us to a deeper understanding of what Matthew is trying to tell us.

First of all these men are wise. That means thoughtful and reflective. They did not live on the surface of things but could penetrate beyond

appearances to hidden meanings. They were star-gazers. Their eyes were fixed on the heavens. They were not bound down to earthly things. Their vision was as high as the sky and as broad as the horizon.

What did they see? A star, a light shining in the dark, a light shining so brightly that the darkness could not overwhelm it, and in their wisdom, somehow they understood that something extraordinary had happened.

They were adventurous. The star beckoned. Come, come, it seemed to say – and so they went; they followed it. It was probably a dangerous journey, but they went anyway. They didn't know where they were going or how far they were going, or how long it would take to get there, but they knew that at the end they would find someone they desperately wanted to see.

And when they found him they gave him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And there is another wealth of theological meaning in those gifts. Gold for a king; incense for a God; and myrrh to embalm the body of someone only too, too human and who would have to die like anyone of us. It's the whole mystery of the Incarnation and an indication of the artistry of the man who wrote the Gospel: so few words and yet what a vast richness of meaning!

Well, what about us today?

We have to be careful not to be so caught up in the attractive elements of the story that we forget that there is much more going on than we perhaps see at first. This is true of the whole Christmas story, whether it's Luke's version or Matthew's.

True, there are angels singing in the midnight sky; there are shepherds and sheep; there is a brilliant star and exotic strangers from the east. And there is so much about it all that is heart-warming, as Christmas should be. But the stories also tell us that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were homeless the night he was born. There was no room in the inn. His mother had no cradle in which to lay him. Instead she used a manger, a feeding trough for animals – and perhaps there is something wonderfully symbolic about that, too. But right from the start he was a child at risk. We heard how the king was disturbed by the news of Jesus's birth, and we know the sequel to the story, how the child's life was threatened and his parents had to flee with him to a foreign country, a pagan land that spoke a language

they did not understand and where there were customs they were not used to.

What about us today? I don't know about you, but I can't help but think of all the at-risk children in our world today. I think of all the families that have had to flee their homes. It can't be easy raising children in Iraq or Afghanistan or Darfur, or even here in these United States where twenty percent of the children grow up in poverty – and the darker their skin, the more at risk they are.

Here at Holy Trinity we have a wonderful record of concern for the poor, of responding to appeals for food and clothing. Along with other Georgetown churches we provide shelter for the homeless during the cold months of winter. And we are helping to rebuild a church destroyed by hurricane Katrina.

But if we are to respond to the presence of this new-born king in our lives today, we have to understand that the poor are poor and the hungry are hungry and the homeless are homeless and certain children are at risk every day of the year and not just at Christmas time.

Perhaps as we face problems that seem insurmountable we can learn a lesson from those Wise Men of old. We must be seekers; we must be willing to look at the ordinary and see the extraordinary, the presence of the Lord in the most unlikely places. We can always pray, and we do that when we come here. But our biggest challenge now is to discover how to wed what happens within these church walls to the reality that exists outside this church.

What about us today? You've all seen the bumper sticker that says, "Wise men still seek him." Indeed wise, truly wise, men, women, and children still seek him and like those three of old, they do it together as a community, since together we can do so much more than we can do alone.

What gifts will we bring? Why not gold, frankincense, and myrrh? The gold of our love, the incense of our praise, and the myrrh, the myrrh of our compassion, of our concern, of our care for the homeless, the hungry, the children who are at risk. And if in this way we truly seek him, then like those wise men of old, we shall ever surely find him.