



January 2, 2011 The Epiphany of the Lord

*Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.-
Matthew 2:2*

Dear Friends;

In the ancient Near East the Magi were a high ranking class of political religious advisers to the rulers of Media and Persia (roughly the areas of modern Iraq and Iran). They resisted the imperialism of the Greeks and later the Romans who both looked down upon this Eastern Culture as inferior.

When the Romans dominated the area the Magi put their support in favor of a Persian (Eastern) king. And they promoted resistance against the West (Rome). Around the year 66 C.E., the Romans accepted a Parthian, Tiridates as the legitimate King of Armenia rather than appoint a puppet king as they did with King Herod and his sons in Judea.

Tiridates took the sons of 3 neighboring rulers, Magi, relatives, servants and three thousand horsemen for a nine-month expenses-paid (by the Romans) trip to bend the knee and accept the crown from the Roman Emperor Nero. This event would have been burned into the memories of everyone in the first-century Mediterranean world. The Magi had great influence as advisers to the Eastern Kings. Matthew undoubtedly had this in mind when he tells the story of the Magi.

Matthew uses the Tiridates story to put a political spin on Jesus' own story. The Magi had for centuries been known for their opposition to Western Imperialism (currently Roman). The Magi travel to submit to Jesus a new King of the Judeans. The story resonates beyond Judah to the whole Middle East.

The murderous, boot-licking Herod the Roman puppet King has reason to be nervous. The visit of the Magi heralds liberation from foreign domination and a restored Eastern Kingship. To add insult to Herod's injury the restoration of an Eastern Kingship comes from not the powerful or elite but from a rather poor village (Bethlehem) in a backwater Province (Judea).

When we look at these Scripture stories it is important for us not to overly sentimentalize them and forget that there were very real social and political realities behind them. Jesus will be condemned to death on the political charge of sedition—that is undermining the political order. The way of Jesus is antithetical to the idea of imperialism.

The Roman Empire was built on power, force, fear and violence. Empires need those things to survive. It is interesting to note that Christianity will begin to transform the empire from within. They did this not by violence but prayerful pacifism.

When Christians were marched into the Roman arenas for martyrdom they often were praying and singing hymns. They were calm and that unnerved the Romans. Writers of the time commented how the arenas became silent at these spectacles. If the Christians did not show fear then the violence upon which the empire was built had become powerless.

As we look at these stories let us also not forget to see them in light of current political struggles. The same struggles are still with us. Jesus comes to liberate us. Let us peacefully resist empire in all its forms.

Peace

Fr Ron