

**Stars of Choice and Journeys of Preference**  
**Epiphany Homily    January 2007**  
**The Inclusive Community    Nutley, New Jersey**

Note: A number of people at the January 7, 2007 Sunday service asked me to write out my homily notes that day and include the text in the Point.

Today's Gospel reading from Mathew focuses on the journey of the Magi. The reading raises for me the question of which star we choose to follow. These are, in a sense, two stars in today's passage, two different journeys, two diverse ways of organizing a life. There is Herod's star and the Magi's star.

The Star of Herod

Herod is the star around which Israel's political life revolves. He is the king, brilliant, astute, talented, tormented.

He killed his first wife, Mariamne, perhaps the only person he ever loved. After her, he married obsessively nine times. He killed some of his sons, driven by the paranoia and insecurity that made him a serial killer. Indeed, the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, once said that he would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son. The pig would stand a greater chance of survival.

Herod was an incredible builder. He built an entire city into the sea, Caesarea Maritima, the fortress Masada and the Temple. Indeed, the Romans considered Herod's buildings the best of their day.

The motive which drove him, in marriage and buildings and having children, was politics and power. Whatever made Herod's star dazzling was, he reasoned, legitimate and imperative. He must be the only center, the only star in the firmament of his universe.

There is irony in the fact that as Herod's power increased, his insecurity intensified. When the self is the only star we follow, the road never leads us home. It makes us aliens even in the land of our own lives. It takes us nowhere. It is a journey of desperation.

In today's brief Gospel passage, we are given four insights into Herod's psyche. They fit the profile of a personality whose own life is the only star visible or allowable.

- Herod is frightened by a child  
    When he hears of the child's birth, "he was frightened." Indeed, monarchs and tyrants see births, marriages and lives as a means of increasing power and prominence. A birth unforeseen, a marriage unarranged, a life uncontrolled, all these are perilous. The point of life is not joy in life but acquisition. There is irony once again. So much power and yet Herod is frightened by a child.

- Herod uses religion to achieve political advantage  
He calls together chief priests and the scribes and, feigning devotion, asks about the Messiah. If religion can help Herod eliminate a potential competitor, then it is indeed, for him, a good religion and a true religion.
- Manipulation  
Herod asks the Magi to return and tell him what they discover. He urges the Magi to search diligently and to return with names and addresses. He manipulates the innocent, spiritually sincere, well-motivated Magi, unable to understand or value selflessness
- Lying  
One must be into deception if power is the only star one recognizes. Herod is a liar, as a leader and a husband, as a father and a king. One would not want to buy a used building or a used chariot from such a man.

Herod convinced the Magi he is asking about the Messiah so that he can pay homage. Herod wants to eliminate the Messiah because a Messianic star would outshine him. Lying and manipulation are useful. Indeed they have become instinctive responses after so many decades as king dealing with the Roman Empire and the Jerusalem establishment.

Herod is not willing to assess how profoundly dysfunctional one becomes when only the self and only one's own star become central. Herod is a tragedy in the making.

When he is near death in 4 BC, he orders the random killing of Jerusalem inhabitants to prevent celebrations of joy at his death.

Irony again. When one's self is the only star one sees, such a star sheds darkness rather than light.

### The Star of the Magi

The Magi follow a very different star. It was there for Herod to see, were he capable or willing.

One does not see this star unless one is looking for more in life than human resources alone can achieve.

One follows such a star because one senses a need to be accountable to the universe, not only the self, and responsible to life itself and not only one's own political agenda.

This is a very different star.

We know less of the Magi biographically than we do of Herod. This is partly due to the fact that their journey and their vision matter more than their resume. It is also largely due to another fact. We need fewer details when we deal with a good life. To say one's mother is a good woman or one's husband is a good man is to say all one needs to know.

A good person is defined not so much by biography and achievements but by the character of the heart. We know less of them because there is more to them.

Notice how differently the same four characteristics which defined Herod, apply to the Magi.

- The Magi are not frightened by the child but “overwhelmed with joy.”  
The Magi do not fit the child into a grand scheme to gain more power for themselves. They celebrate the child for who the child is in its own right. They are made happy not by what the child's life or death can do for them but by the miracle of life the child incarnates. The Magi are not frightened by life they cannot control. They rejoice in the claims the child's life makes on them to care for the child and to serve the child. The child generates generosity in them, not terror.
- The Magi seek in religion an encounter with God  
The Magi are filled with awe, humility, peace, generosity. They kneel down, we are told, overwhelmed by what they experience. They pay homage and offer gifts. They find the child more marvelous than the gold they bring.  
  
All genuine gift-giving is premised on the belief that the one to whom we give the gift is far more valuable than what we offer. It is the greatness of our love for the person which makes our gifts a mere token.
- The Magi do not have the language or the heart for manipulation  
The Magi have undertaken a long journey, not for their own advantage but to find the child and honor him. They have no agenda. The journey ends wherever life is found. The child is not a piece in some grand power game. The Magi feel unworthy before the gift they receive. They seek nothing more than to be present before the child and rejoice in him.
- The Magi are committed to truth and incapable of lying.  
Rather than give Herod a truth he would use to destroy the child or a lie they chose not to utter, the Magi, politically less adroit than Herod but humanly far more impressive, go home another way. There is an interesting strategy in this. By choosing an alternate route and by-passing Herod all together, they let the evil system die of its own corruption.

Herod dies that very year. The child, of course, still lives.

Everyone who reads about Herod shudders and chooses to find a way around him so that they do not become like him.

Everyone who reads of the Magi rejoices. In their lives, the truth prevails and we celebrate it.

There are no Christmas or Epiphany hymns to Herod. There are many to the Magi and the star they showed us and the journey they took.

What is our Star of Choice?

So, which star shall we follow?

Herod's star seems promising at first sight but it is riddled with folly and fraud and death. It leads to a journey of fear and manipulation and lying and self-destruction.

The Magi's star seems, at first, impractical and remote and visionary and unattainable. It leads, however, to joy and generosity and truth and self-fulfillment.

You and I must choose our stars.

In today's story, we see two stars in the firmament. One looks so much like a star that Herod follows it. It is not, however, a star at all but a black hole.

The other is a star that leads to God and Christ and, paradoxically, enhances our lives, bringing us personal security and happiness. This star, you see, always manages, even when we are in alien lands and strangers to ourselves, this star always manages to take us home.

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