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The Wise Men Visit Jesus

Matthew 2:1–12 · Bud · Ages 9–12

Matthew tells us that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem. The Greek word is magi: scholars who studied the stars, probably from Persia or Babylon. They had seen a star rise and took it as the sign of a newborn King of the Jews. They had come to worship him.

Their question shook the city. Herod was a ruler who guarded his throne jealously, and the news troubled him. He gathered the chief priests and scribes and asked where the Messiah was to be born. They pointed to the prophet Micah: Bethlehem, small as it was, would give Israel a ruler who would shepherd God's people (Mt 2:6, quoting Mic 5:2).

Herod met the magi privately, found out exactly when the star had appeared, and sent them to Bethlehem, asking them to report back so that he could come and worship too. Matthew lets the reader sense that Herod was not to be trusted.

As the magi left, the star they had seen at its rising went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. Matthew piles up words to describe their happiness: they were overjoyed, with a joy almost too big to hold. Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then they offered gifts fit for a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went home by another road.

Why does this matter? These visitors were not Jewish. The Church sees in them the first of the nations coming to Christ. The feast of the Epiphany celebrates Jesus shown to the whole world as Messiah, Son of God and Savior (CCC 528). The magi also show what to do when we find him: bow down and give him our best.

A note on tradition: the Bible doesn't say there were three of them or that they were kings. The number likely comes from the three gifts, and the names Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar come from later tradition.

Talk about it

1. How is the magi's response to Jesus different from Herod's?
2. Why does it matter that the first worshipers in Matthew's Gospel come from outside Israel?
3. What does it mean to worship Jesus? What does that look like at Mass?
4. What part of the story comes from the Bible, and what comes from later tradition?

Key verse: Mt 2:11. Look it up in your Bible.