

Kingly presence: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

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Because we know almost nothing about the wise men, our imaginations take wing. If we were brought up in the Christian faith, these characters have ridden across our minds and hearts ever since we were taken to our first Sunday school pageant. Even the most sophisticated children secretly envy those who have been selected to play the wise men. Parents will ransack attics for pieces of fabric—the more brilliant and exotic the better—and someone in the family will create a costume that will be linked to no particular age or time or culture but will somehow speak of far-off places, distant shores, desert sands and starry skies—all at the same time.

In my house, which all four children have now left, there is an old pine dough box. Once it was used in a farmhouse as the repository where bread dough would rise. But year after year at Christmas, the dough box had another, more exalted role: it served as manger for the Christ child. To this day there is a brass box in our bedroom that served for years as “the gift of gold” borne up the aisle, as did two of our pottery jars, both of them filled by the congregation’s imagination with frankincense and myrrh.

They have always fascinated us, these travelers who must have loomed in the entrance to the cave before an astonished—and probably alarmed—Mary and Joseph. All the language we use about them tends to reach for a larger-than-life quality. One of the church’s hymns claims that to rival their gifts we would have to bring to this “brightest and best of the sons of the morning, odors of Edom, gems of the mountain, pearls of the ocean.” When Isaiah speaks of such visitors, he speaks in the most extravagant terms. “Kings!” Isaiah proclaims. “Kings come to the brightness of your dawn.” And because the traditional three camels do not seem enough to do justice to the celebration, we turn to Isaiah’s evocation of “a multitude of camels . . . the young camels of Midian and Ephah.” Then, “all those from Sheba” are invited too.

But even Isaiah fails to satisfy our wish to paint a vast and wonderful canvas for these visitors to the stable. We go to the psalmist for more vivid images, and he

obliges by bringing on stage “the kings of Tarshish and of the isles . . . the kings of Sheba and Seba,” saying of them that they “all fall down” before this child.

This child. In those two words we give the reason for our longing for the most expansive language and images we can create, for we know this child’s glory calls forth every possible beauty of utterance, image, art and song. We know that no stage is too vast for this child, no visitor too royal to kneel, and no gift too precious to offer.

Moments later we listen to Paul. How excited he is by what he has to impart—this mystery, this revelation, this gospel! Notice how he too is reaching for the most expansive language he can conjure up to express his thought. And no wonder. For instead of a small land and a marginal people being the recipients of this news, the entire world has become a wide field for God’s seeding. To use Paul’s term, the horizon has been pushed back to include the gentiles—the world!

As we finish listening to Paul’s excited sharing of this vast new possibility for the gospel, we hear Matthew telling us how the Magi completed their journey—dismounting, entering into the shadows of the cave, kneeling and offering their gifts. And as we listen we realize that we have seen the coming of the very first gentiles, kneeling and worshiping before this God in human flesh, a God not yet even weaned by his mother.

The Magi fascinate us also because they do not fit into this tiny stage of hill village and humble stable. Their sophistication clashes with this simplicity, their obvious power sits uneasily beside the vulnerability of child and family. They are urban in a rural world, affluent in the midst of poverty, cosmopolitan amid the provincial.

We discern their wisdom even as we read of their dealings with the court of Herod. Civilized and mannered, they pay their respects to Herod, yet with contemptuous ease they see the reality behind the pathetic physical and mental wreck Herod has become. They have gained experience at a far more powerful court, and have no illusions about Herod’s ability to be dangerous and vicious, even in his decline.

Theirs is a deep wisdom. The Magi represent forever and for all of us the wisdom that recognizes human life to be a journey taken in search of One who calls us beyond ourselves into faithful service—One before whom we are prepared to kneel, and to whom we offer the best of our gifts, flawed and unworthy though they be.

We watch these visitors to Bethlehem, as they kneel with supreme grace and dignity before what is to them simplicity, vulnerability and poverty. They are prepared to kneel, for in their wisdom—and this is the heart of what makes them truly wise—they discern the glory that is hidden in this place and in this child.

And so we too, daily engaged in our own all too human journey, searching for that which would have us be so much more than we are, and bearing our unworthy gifts, kneel on the stable floor beside these royal ones, worshiping with them the child who is most royal.