

October 21

Matthew 2

Hey everyone, Klint Bitter here. Thanks for checking out the Project 4:4 daily accelerator today, it's October 21<sup>st</sup>.

It's good to be in the New Testament!! The wait is over. The silence has been broken. Light is piercing the darkness. Christ has come! I'm not sure about you, but I'm excited to read through the New Testament with the Old Testament freshly on my mind. It will be interesting to see what 'pops' with the prophetic and historical background to set against the NT scene.

Today, our reading took us primarily through Matthew and Luke chapter 2. Matthew, Luke and Mark are considered the "synoptic" Gospels because they share so much content. Without a doubt, Matthew was the most popular Gospel account with the second century church. While there is some debate over whether Matthew or Mark was written first, the practical application of that debate for the reader really is minimal. Whether it's first or second, Matthew is an account of the life and ministry of Jesus inspired by God's Holy Spirit.

One of the things you'll notice as you read Matthew is the compelling case he makes for the legitimacy of Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Throughout the book, you'll see Matthew quoting the prophets and how they pointed forward to the person of Jesus Christ. One possible reason for this 'flavor' of content is the likelihood that this Gospel was written for an audience of mostly Jewish converts to Christianity. They would have understood every subtle reference, known every prophet and their understanding of Jesus as the long promised Messiah would be solidified.

Our reading today begins with the visit of philosopher-priests to the child Jesus. I want to note that, right from the beginning Jesus is a paradox. Of course, we've just re-read the account of Jesus' virgin birth and the other extraordinary events surrounding his coming. We see the remarkability of Jesus again in our Scripture from today.

These men from the east come looking for a King and go to King Herod to determine where to find the newborn. The Scripture tells us that not only is Herod shocked, but all of Jerusalem with him. Can you imagine the rumors flying around the city? Can you imagine the scandal? It's easy to understand why Herod felt threatened.

All of this because of a baby: born on a road trip, in a stable, in the company of shepherds. This is unheard of! From the very beginning the boy Jesus is a figure that causes people to perk up and take note. Certainly this continues in our day. We can speak of God and religion with little push back, but the name of Jesus sparks unique reactions.

Well, these Magi, it should be noted don't find Jesus on the night of his birth in the company of the shepherds. It's pretty plain to read here as our text is organized chronologically. But this drives me crazy during Christmas time when I see so many nativity scenes with wise men presenting their gifts. My wife reminds me that I probably react too strongly when I take the wise men out of our kids' nativity scene toys just to prove my point.

Our best estimates put the eastern travelers in Bethlehem 6 -12 months following Jesus' birth. Jesus is referred to as a child, not a babe. The family is found in a house, not an "inn". Additionally, one must take into account the time it would take these Magi to follow the star westward to Jerusalem and subsequently to Bethlehem. Finally, when Herod inquires about when they had first seen the star, he orders the death of the boys in Bethlehem under 2 years old. If the birth had been recent, he would likely have been more specific. So, wise men at the nativity scene seem unlikely at best.

I'd like to highlight one more thought from this story. Remember that Matthew is clearly written to a Jewish audience. Thinking (and studying) through the visit of the Magi – a story only found in Matthew, it occurred to me how powerful of a statement this must have been to the Jewish reader. In the early church, we find those of Jewish decent fighting for significance over their Gentile-Christian counterparts. See, the Jews felt they had an exclusive claim to this promised Messiah.

Put that thought together with the picture of these men from a pagan nation recognizing the Kingship of Jesus. This is the first indication we have that Jesus' ministry, life, death and resurrection would accomplish something not just for those of Jewish heritage, but those of human heritage. This is a moving picture, right off the bat, that Jesus transcends race, political affiliation, citizenship...Jesus is establishing an eternal Kingdom of people from every tribe, every nation and every tongue. And that's good news!

In our reading today, there's also the very dark account of Herod's brutality. Moving in greed and insecurity, Herod orders the death of all boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who are two years old and younger. Scholars estimate that about 30 children were killed. Seeing this, it's no wonder Joseph kept his family in Egypt until Herod's death. Herod's brutality even had impact past his death as Joseph; being warned in a dream took his family to Galilee and settled down in a town called Nazareth.

Certainly, there's more we could address in our text today. But we'll stop here for now. I'll be back tomorrow with more from the Gospel accounts. This is Klint Bitter, be a blessing today!