



**Solemnity of the Epiphany – January 4, 2009**  
Matthew 2.1-12

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd M. Ansley Tucker**

In a way, this quest of the magi takes its place in a lifetime of such questing. The magi were, in all likelihood, Persian astrologers — which is to say, non-Jews, pagans who looked to something other than the worship and mercy of the One God to sustain and protect them in this life. They were practised in reading the skies, and in the interpretation of whatever signs they found there. And what for? Why, in order to gain control of their own destiny. Why else do people turn to tarot, palmistry or their horoscope? Why else would the wise men have saddled up and followed the star to Bethlehem? They weren't Jews, and would have had no innate desire to set eyes upon a King of the Jews, unless to do so would serve some "higher" purpose. We are constantly seeking some way to get a leg up on the future, perchance to prepare for it, or for that matter, to shape and change it to one's own advantage.

But do you see that here we have crossed over onto perilous ground, for we have slithered from worship to incantation, from liturgy to magic, from surrender to control. And lest we imagine that this is no sin of ours, think again. For how quickly our religiosity becomes a mechanism for control! We pray to get what we want — which is to say, to get some control over our life. We shower the Deity with praise and thanksgiving. At its best, it is worship. But at its worst, it is sheer flattery, pure manipulation: we imagine that if only we say the right things, in just the right way (the very definition of magic cant), God will be pleased with us, and accede to our requests. But we don't just *ask*: we even engage in bargaining — "O God, if only you will do x, y, or z, I will never eat bad cholesterol again". Or again, we suppose that we can earn God's favour — or at the very least, that God owes us something for good behaviour. Isn't it true? We just can't figure it out when bad things happen to good people, or for that matter, when good things happen to bad people. We assume that our goodness should be rewarded. It isn't just the magi who seek to gain control over their destiny.

Indeed, I suggest that Christians above all are inclined to treat their religion in this way. Ours is a God who has come close to us, as close as our own flesh and blood; ours is a God who has made himself small, and vulnerable, as small and vulnerable as a helpless infant; ours is a God who allowed himself to be "done to death" without striking back, without revealing his divine identity, and who now makes himself as present to us as the Wind we breathe. Moreover, we live in an age that is uncomfortable with images of God that held sway in earlier generations: God as the awesome, majestic, mysterious, even somewhat frightening, transcendent Other. We haven't quite the sense of ourselves as supplicants before the divine Majesty we once had; God is completely approachable — our friend, even our buddy, to whom our unfettered access is always assured. Who wouldn't think you could prevail upon such a God for your every wish? A baby, for heaven's sake!

Only this child will not be co-opted. And that, according to Martin Smith, is the terrible lesson of the Epiphany. He seizes upon the last line of Yeats' poem, "The Magi", in which he speaks of "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor". The Magi arrive, finally, having read the Stars, having consulted the religious experts, thinking — one may suppose — that they have now got the proverbial tiger by the tail. Here he is! Now let's figure out how to use him.

But it doesn't work that way. Signs are only signs, and the ability to read them does not imply control. It's a little like driving through the mountains, or some parts of the Canadian Shield: every so often you'll see a sign that reads "Falling Rock: Beware". Well, so what if you do? It's really quite comical when you stop to think about it. Either a rock is going to fall, or it isn't. You're not going to make it happen, and you're not going to keep it from happening. The fact that you can read the sign gives you no control whatsoever over your destiny.

And the Child Christ is like that: the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

Smith goes on to articulate what I think is a fascinating "take" on the gift-giving of the Magi. For if the Magi are spiritual technicians, practised in the arts of control, then what they encounter in the little God-Man named Jesus, is Judgment, is the undoing of their assumptions, and livelihood. And so Smith sees the presentation of their gifts as the emptying of, indeed the repudiation of, their bag of tricks. They've brought along all the tools of their trade: gold by which to buy favour (wealth is one of the most powerful means of control we have); the incense by which they "fog and scent their rituals"<sup>1</sup>; and myrrh, a potion for anointing. And in the face of the uncontrollable mystery they jettison their means of control. It isn't a gift-giving so much as a surrender, a letting-go, a relinquishment of their vain attempts to manage God.

Ironically, the very thing which makes us most likely to imagine that we can control the uncontrollable mystery is what makes it possible for us to relinquish our quest for control. God is God, and cannot, will not, be manipulated. His grace cannot be bought, sold, earned, or wheedled out of him. But what we discover there on the bestial floor is that we don't need to do these things. It is the fact that we have seen God as close as our flesh, as little as an infant, as present as the Wind, that teaches us that we have no need to nail down our destiny, no need to make sure God gets it right. God is already with us, *this close*, and he will act freely, without constraint, without our advice and direction, to keep it that way.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin L. Smith, SSJE, *Nativities and Passions: Words for Transformation* (Cowley: Cambridge, 1995), pp. 14. The general idea for this sermon is cribbed and reworked from pp. 13-17.