

Epiphany Under Empire

The last in a series for Advent and Christmas

BY CHED MYERS

“Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar, protect us again this year from the dangers of fire and water.”

— German prayer for the feast of the Three Kings

THE ORIGINS OF the feast of the Epiphany are historically complicated and ecclesially disputed. We might think of it as a kind of peace offering from the Western to the Eastern church, given the latter’s date (surely older) of Jan. 6 for the feast of the Nativity. The 12 Days of Christmas, in turn, bridge the two traditions, straddling exactly our celebration of the New Year.

Epiphany has a rich cultural history in the West, from Plough Monday in early England (a drinking day for the peasantry) to La Fiesta de los Reyes Magos, still celebrated among Hispanics. What caught my attention in researching such traditions, however, was an old German practice of ritually purifying the household on the 12th day, the eve of Epiphany. Herbs were burned and the letters C+M+B (representing the legendary names of the Magi) inscribed above the entry to the house and barn, followed by a prayer asking for protection in the coming year “from the ravages of fire and water.”

This seems a compelling petition for our world, which like the Magi and Holy Family of old, dwells uneasily under the shadow of empire. Indeed, despite the recent electoral turn, the reigning United States administra-

tion continues its rehabilitation of the old Pax Romana policy of “permanent war.” How many contested landscapes suffer the “fire” of depleted uranium munitions and “smart bombs”? And when it comes to deadly “water”—as if the Katrina debacle were not grim enough—our markets, our media and



our senses are saturated after being flooded with the delusions and distractions of commodity fetishism.

But how are ancient, mythical magi supposed to protect us from such epidemic dehumanization? Their story is indeed the focus of Epiphany, alluded to at the end of the feast’s Old Testament reading (Isa 60: 1-2, 6):

Arise, shine; for your light has

come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.... A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

While the theological theme of the in-breaking of the Light tends to dominate our contemporary liturgical celebrations, we should not overlook the Magi. But that is not easy in imperial America, with its White House crèches and relentless commercial huckstering. We have long candy-coated and Disneyfied the Christmas story beyond biblical recognition, and no characters have been more domesticated than the wise men from the East.

The Nativity Narratives

The Nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke may have few details in common, but they agree on one basic theme: God-in-Christ slips unnoticed into a world of brutal rulers and hard-pressed refugees, and a few unheralded people manage to recognize the presence and act accordingly. Whereas the classical literature of antiquity focused exclusively upon powerful and famous personalities—not unlike the media in our culture—our Gospels portray ordinary people as the true protagonists. The central characters are a poor couple who end up homeless (Luke) and fleeing as political refugees (Matthew). Yet both Evangelists insist that

CHED MYERS, an activist theologian and writer working with Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries in southern California (www.bcm-net.org), is the author of several books, including *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Orbis, 1988).

ART BY JULE LONNEMAN

these obscure events at the margins of empire somehow posed a sharp challenge to the rule of domination by Caesar (Luke) and Herod (Matthew).

Matthew's account narrates the conflict between a king (Herod) and a child (Jesus), to which the visit of the Magi (Matt 2:1-12) is central. The biblical scholar Richard Horsley, in *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (Crossroad, 1989), writes: "Quite apart from any particular incident that may underlie it, the story portrays a network of historical relationships that prevailed in the general circumstance of the birth of the messiah." Horsley describes how Herod, the powerful half-Jewish despot serving Rome's interests in colonial Palestine, oppressed his own people with taxes to fund his grandiose building projects. Herod "instituted what today would be called a police-state, complete with loyalty oaths, surveillance, informers, secret police, imprisonment, torture and brutal retaliation against any serious dissenter." Horsley concludes: "Matthew 2 comes to life vividly against the background of Herodian exploitation and tyranny."

In addition to its historical verisimilitude, Matthew's caricature of Herod is also inspired by two stories from the Hebrew Bible. The first is found in Num 22-23, where the Canaanite King Balak summons Balaam "from the east" to curse Israel, only to be betrayed when the prophet instead pronounces a blessing. In Matt 2:1-12, Herod is double-crossed by Magi "from the east," whom he had employed as agents to find Jesus, ostensibly so he could "bless" him.

The Magi seek a star, a cosmic symbol in antiquity signifying the birth of a great leader. Herod is understandably disturbed that these foreign diplomats have named the child King of the Jews, for that is his own title! He clearly understands it as a challenge to his political legitimacy, which was continually contested by Judean nationalists of the time. But in a fashion typical of the powerful (then and now), Herod cloaks his real intentions in pious pretense (Matt 2:8). The Magi, however, are not fooled. Finding Jesus, they offer him gifts befitting true authority, thereby rendering him their allegiance, before they turn heel and slip out of the country.

Horsley provides fascinating historical

context. *Magoi* were "originally a caste of highest ranking politico-religious advisers or officers of the Median emperor, then in the Persian imperial court." It seems these sages and seers wielded legendary political influence, which explains why in earliest Christian tradition they were portrayed both as wise men and kings. More importantly, *magoi* may well have been instrumental in opposing the Hellenistic imperial forces that conquered them and other ancient Near Eastern peoples. Throughout the first century C.E., there was a continuing confrontation, if not out-

right war between the Romans and the Parthian empire to the east. It is not difficult to imagine that the Magi would have been associated with the eastern empire in opposition to Rome.

The Empire Strikes Back

Their actions in Matthew, therefore, are both conscientious (saving innocent life) and politically subversive (since Herod was clearly aligned with Rome). Their "civil disobedience" to imperial authority calls to mind a second story from the Hebrew Bible. Exodus 1-2 narrates the

birth of Moses, whose life is also threatened by a paranoid potentate, and who is similarly saved by noncooperating double agents. The challenge of an infant brings both Herod and Pharaoh to unleash policies of infanticide, justified by national security. But the best-laid royal plans fail because their accomplices (the Hebrew midwives, the *magoi*) instead deceive their superiors in order to choose life. We never hear again of these mysterious heroes in the biblical story—yet upon their bit parts of costly conscience hangs the entire drama. Dare we assume that our own choices in a time of imperial violence, minor players though we be, are of any less consequence?

In the stories of both Moses and Jesus, the empire strikes back, and the slaughter of innocents ensues. (The Bible is much clearer than we are about the cynical realities of statecraft.) “Rachel weeps” (Matt 2:17, Jer 31:14) over such an absurd mismatch: emperors versus infants. Yet as imperial minds plot genocide, God’s messengers enter the world at risk. Moses floats down the Nile in a reed basket (Exod 2:3). Jesus is spirited out of the country on back roads (Matt 2:14); the savior of the world starts life as a political refugee. Against the crushing presence of power is pitted the liberating power of presence.

This biblical paradox is commemorated on the feast of the Holy Innocents (Dec. 28), a sobering interlude to the 12 Days of Christmas. It was instituted by the Latin church in the fifth century to preserve the underside of the Nativity story. It is underappreciated by Christians in the United States. This feast offers a grim reminder that there was and still is a political cost to the Incarnation. Friends at Jonah House in Baltimore have taught me its importance; each year on Dec. 28, they hold “Faith and Resistance” retreats that bear witness to peace in the teeth of imperial militarism at the Pentagon, because children continue to be the collateral damage of kingly pretensions—from Iraq to Darfur to Colombia.

Perhaps the old church anticipated that the Christmas season would become too sentimentalized and too innocuous in a comfortable Christendom, and with foresight it wisely instituted the feast of the Innocents as a sharp counterpoint to all the pious pageantry. As such it can pre-

pare us to recover Epiphany as a season of resistance to imperial violence.

Typically in our North American churches, Epiphany brings triumphal paens to “the miraculous and glorious Light of divine revelation.” The problem, however, is that this light fails to inhabit real political geography. The entire journey of Christmastide, from the Nativity to Epiphany, confirms the New Testament conviction that the Messiah will forever sneak into our history like a “thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2). La Fiesta de los Reyes Magos reminds us of ambiguity, violence, displacement and danger, which is to say, of real life as it is for the poor in the shadow of empire. For our world too teems with refugees, wailing mothers and murderous foreign policies. We can learn from the Zimbabwean civic group Sokwanele, for example, which throughout Christmastide educates and organizes against “the deliberate manipulation of food in our country for short-term political gain...policies and practices which amount to state-imposed starvation.”

Epiphany invites us to remember old stories of resistance from the entrails of Leviathan that were spun and preserved by people of conscience with no certainty of the consequences of their resistance. May the same stories give us courage and hope in our own time of imperial discontent. Let us pray during this season for the growing numbers of soldiers who are conscientiously not cooperating with the Iraq/Afghan war and for agents of creative nonviolence in conflict zones around the world, from Palestine to Sri Lanka. May we remember our own recent martyrs of justice and peace, like the Christian Peacemaker Team member Tom Fox (the Quaker from Virginia who was abducted and executed in Iraq nine months ago) and Sister Dorothy Stang (the 73-year-old nun from Ohio who was assassinated in Brazil in 2005 for her prophetic resistance to corporate interests pillaging the rain forests).

The Bible has seen our historical moment before and assures us that “God is with us,” alongside the victims of “fire and water” and those who stand with them. It is into this darkness that the light still sneaks. The question is: Will we recognize the presence and, like the Magi, act accordingly? 