

Knowledge and Wisdom

In the name of him who was born King of the Jews, dear friends in Christ: Some of the brightest and best educated people I've come across in my life are also the most foolish. Likewise, I've encountered many people whom no one would accuse of being particularly sharp and who don't have much in the way of formal education who abound in what is called common sense (but it probably shouldn't be called that because not everyone has it). I suspect that you've experienced this also. How is it possible? It's because there is a distinct difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge has to do with what and how much you know. It's sum of the information that you are aware of and the acquired skills that you are able to perform. Wisdom, on the other hand, has to do with how you apply what you know in order to make good decisions and render proper judgments. Knowledge is gained through instruction and learning; it's quantifiable. Wisdom, by contrast, is an intangible quality. It *can* be increased through life experience and thoughtful deduction; but it's a little harder to pin down, and some folks never achieve it. Thus it's possible to have a lot of one and not much of the other. Ideally, you want to have both knowledge and wisdom.

I bring this up because the Christmas story and its follow up that we have before us today, the arrival of the eastern sages, makes a good case study in showing the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Take the Bethlehem shepherds. They likely had very little if anything in the way of formal education. They knew about taking care of sheep, and probably not much else. The angels suddenly appear informing them of the Christ Child's birth. In this way the shepherds gained a knowledge that no one else had. Ah, but they showed wisdom when they said to one another, "Let's go see this thing that the Lord has made known to us."

On the other end of the knowledge scale, we've got the wise men; though wise is not the best translation of what they really were. The Greek text labels them "magi". It's same root word from which we get *magic* and *magician*. They were the kind of guys that kings in ancient times kept on hand to advise them by reading signs and forecasting the future. They were highly educated, yes; but so much of the knowledge they had accumulated was pure nonsense. They studied things like casting spells and enchantments, and to which god you were to sacrifice what to in order please them and then (hopefully) get the result you desired. They learned about interpreting dreams, reading omens in the entrails and organs of sacrificed animals, and divining the future by casting bones or through astrology – as if the random pattern of tossed bones or the position of the stars at the time of your birth had anything at all to do with what you would later become or accomplish. Such notions are foolish, not wise. They would be outright laughable if there weren't a lot of people even today who believe in them. As it is, it's just sad.

But in ancient times and among the pagans these things were considered to be state of the art science. Scholars spent many years and lots of money to acquire this knowledge that very few possessed. And to be fair, not all of it was complete nonsense. Take astrology. There actually is a science to understand the regular movements of the sun, moon, planets, and stars. And to be able to predict accurately when certain alignments would take place or when an eclipse would occur, why, that would almost seem like magic to someone who didn't know the secrets. Of course, astrology takes it a step farther. By studying centuries' worth of data about what had happened in history when certain alignments of stars and planets had occurred, say, what famous people were born or died, what battles were won or lost, what plague of deadly

disease began or ended, certain patterns might seem to appear – especially if you were selective with the data you chose. From these patterns meaning could be assigned, the assumption being that because when such and so alignment of stars and planets happened in the past *this* event took place, when the same alignment occurs again, something similar is going to take place. Now, that's a faulty assumption; there's nothing to it. But still, if you believed in this stuff and were any good at it, it would mean you'd have to have tons of knowledge about both the movement of the heavenly bodies and history.

So, we can say for certain that the magi knew a great deal. We might be able to say too that they were wise in the ways of the world. The trouble is that with respect to the Lord and the light of his truth, they were almost completely in the dark. But that's what makes the account of the magi's coming so remarkable. The Lord co-opts their system. He reaches into their darkness with a message written in a language they could read in the stars. He arranges the heavenly bodies at the time of Christ's birth to tell them in a way they would understand that a king is born in Judah. And the Lord must have written it in capital letters because these magi knew that this was really big; that this king born in Judah is somehow our king too. They got the message. And like the shepherds, they showed wisdom when they said, "Let's go see and worship him."

That brings us to their arrival in Jerusalem. They show up expecting to see the city in celebration, after all, the birth of a great prince is good news for a nation. What they find is another story. Herod the Great, the titular "king of the Jews", is an old man. He hasn't fathered a son in decades. And several of the sons that he did father, he had executed. He was paranoid and feared that they were plotting against him to take the throne. But word gets around that the magi are seeking a newborn prince. They are certain of it. They read it in the stars.

It deeply disturbs the whole city and especially king Herod. Everyone knows that though Herod is called king of the Jews, he was appointed to that position by the Roman Senate. Herod himself was neither a Jew by race nor was he of royal blood. He was instead an ambitious opportunist who put himself forward at the right time and greased the right palms to get his job. But he also knew that the people over whom he ruled on behalf of his Roman masters were expecting a Messiah to come – a real King of the Jews, a King appointed not by Rome, but by the Lord. And that he saw as a threat to himself and to his position. Armed with his knowledge, he decided to do something really foolish. He decided to try to thwart the plan and purpose of God and destroy this new king in his cradle.

But first he needed some more information. He summons the chief priests and religious scholars to inquire of them where the Christ is to be born. They know the answer. Like his father, King David, the Christ will be born in Bethlehem of Judah. So says the prophet Micah: "from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." They have the knowledge. And now they have good reason to believe that the promised Savior has indeed been born – the One who is the hope and deepest desire of every Israelite who's ever lived. But what do they do with their knowledge? Nothing! They stay in Jerusalem, even though Bethlehem is only five or six miles to the south. Can't be bothered to go see him. Too much trouble and inconvenience. They know; but show themselves to be fools.

It falls to the Gentile magi to seek him out. Herod pulls them aside secretly, informing them of the Christ Child's likely location. He feeds them a story about how he too would like to go see and worship the new King. "Send me word once you find him." Foolishly, they fall for it

– even though by now they’ve almost certainly heard of Herod’s treatment of anyone he perceives as a threat to his throne.

Off they go to complete their quest. The star or planet or comet (whatever it was) that they first saw rise on the eastern horizon several months before, has now reached its zenith and is directly overhead. They know that they are in the right place. It fills them with great joy. And Bethlehem being a small village, it doesn’t take much time for them to find Him whom they seek. Falling down in worship before him, they present their offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Their actions foreshadow how it will be mostly Gentiles – people of all nations – who were in darkness but have now come into the Light who recognize and worship him; while his own people Israel, who have long had the Light of God’s revealed Word, for the most part do not.

And then, having seen and worshipped the Christ Child, the magi prepare to return to their homeland. In a dream the Lord gives them a bit more knowledge. Herod means the Child harm. Do go back to him. Wisely, they act on this new knowledge, and return home by a route that does not take them back to Jerusalem. Thus they show that they have acquired both knowledge and wisdom.

The question is: will we? We have knowledge. We know who Jesus is and what he has done to save us from sin. We know where he is to be found today as he comes to us in his Word and Sacraments. We know that through these he gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation. We know that with these he pours out his Spirit upon us to lead and guide us into all godliness. We know too that with respect to him and his righteousness, there is always more to know, always more that we can learn. Armed with what we know, will we be wise? That’s the question. In the days and years ahead, the Lord grant us to be so. And o come, let us worship him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!