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CATHOLIC RETREATS

STARLIGHT  
A RETREAT GUIDE FOR ADVENT ON THE THREE WISE MEN

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## INTRODUCTION

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### *Retreat Overview*

The journey of the Three Wise Men who followed a star to Bethlehem, a journey which the entire Church celebrates on the Solemnity of Epiphany as the culmination of the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas, is like a living parable.

The core of the parable is the Magi's journey: The Magi undertook a journey to encounter God. And isn't that what every Christian life is, in its essence, a journey to the definitive encounter with God?

Isn't each one of us traveling through the vicissitudes of life, making our way towards God's eternal throne, where we hope to be welcomed once and for all into the everlasting and totally fulfilling life of heaven, of perfect and uninterrupted communion with God?

This is what the Bible means when it refers to Christians as "aliens and sojourners" in this world (1 Peter 2:11). This is what Christian spirituality throughout the ages means when it calls Christians "pilgrims" and our time on earth a "pilgrimage of faith... toward eternal happiness" (cf. Lumen Gentium 21 & 58).

This Retreat Guide, *Starlight: A Retreat Guide on the Three Wise Men*, will dig into this living parable, seeking wisdom to help us along our own Christian journey.

- In the first meditation, we will consider the star that guided the three Magi to Jesus.
- In the second meditation, we will focus on some difficulties the Magi encountered along the way.
- And in the conference and personal questionnaire, we will examine one way that we, just like the Magi, can offer our own treasures and gifts to Jesus as an act of worship, even while we are still in the middle of our journey.

To begin, let's take a few minutes to turn our attention to God's presence. He is with us right now, gazing at us with love. Let's renew our faith in that love, and let's open our hearts to receive whatever that love wants to give us.

## INTRODUCTION

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### *Matthew 2:1-12*

When you're ready, we will start our first meditation by simply reading through the Gospel passage in Matthew, Chapter 2.



*When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

*Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.*

– Matthew 2:1-12

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *The Star of Bethlehem*

The catalyst that set the Magi's journey in motion was the mysterious star that appeared and somehow indicated that the promised King of the Jews, the King that many prophets had predicted would bring order and justice back to the world, had been born.

What was this star? Why did it mean so much to the Magi? And what meaning does it have for us?

St. Matthew didn't record many details about this mysterious star. As a result, theologians, scholars, and skeptics have speculated to no end over the last two thousand years about what it really was.

The various theories fall into three categories.

- Some say that the whole story was just made up — these same people say the same thing about every other chapter in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. It's a prejudiced position, which doesn't really stand up under honest scholarly scrutiny, so we won't waste time refuting it.
- Others say that the star was a pure miracle, a brand new heavenly body that appeared and disappeared miraculously, whose sole purpose was to guide the Magi to Bethlehem.
- The third group of theories posits that the star of Bethlehem was a natural phenomenon, like a supernova, perhaps, whose appearance and timing were so extraordinary as to reveal to the Magi that the prophesied King of the Jews had been born.

The Church has not defined any dogma explaining the nature of the star. It has preferred to focus on the spiritual and theological significance of the event as a whole. As a result, speculations continue to pop up, some more convincing than others.

One recent theory belonging to an American lawyer and law professor named Frederick Larson is particularly interesting, and you can learn all about it at his website, [www.bethlehemstar.com](http://www.bethlehemstar.com).

St. Matthew only tells us that the Magi saw the star at its rising, and that it somehow communicated to them that the promised King of the Jews, the promised Savior of the world, had been born.

Why would a star be able to alter these men's lives so significantly? Why would God have chosen to use a star to speak to them of the Savior? To answer those questions, we need to reflect a little bit on who these Magi were.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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*Why Did It Mean So Much to the Magi?*

St. Matthew doesn't tell us much about the Magi either, but he tells us enough.

First of all, they were not Jews. This is perhaps the most important thing from St. Matthew's perspective, because it verifies that Jesus really is the promised Messiah. Many biblical prophecies spoke about the Messiah attracting the presence and worship of foreign, non-Jewish people.

In fact, part of the Messiah's mission was to extend the reach of God's saving promise beyond his Chosen People of the Old Testament, to create a worldwide Chosen People of the New Testament — the Church. The Magi, the first non-Jewish worshippers of Jesus, began the fulfillment of that prophetic promise.

Second, St. Matthew tells us that the Magi came "from the east." Most likely, they were royal Chaldean scientists and scholars from the ancient city of Babylon. Ancient kingdoms and empires created and maintained groups of scholars as advisors to the throne.

Five centuries before the time of Christ, when the Babylonian Empire conquered Judea, they actually brought some of the young Jewish scholars at the time to Babylon to become members of just such a team of advisors.

Among the Jews taken into custody was the young prophet Daniel, who spent the rest of his life there in court of the various rulers of the turbulent empire. Some biblical scholars actually think that Daniel introduced Jewish knowledge into the Babylonian group of scholarly advisors, and the Magi who came to Bethlehem were disciples of that ancient school.

This could explain why their hearts were filled with anticipation and longing for the promised Messiah-King of the Jews, and why they undertook such a strange journey when the mysterious star arose and revealed that he had been born.

Whatever the historic details actually were, these wise men from the east yearned so passionately for the coming of the Lord that as soon as they knew he had come, they set off to worship him.

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*What Does It Mean for Us?*

Since the Magi's experience is a living parable, it has a lot to tell us about our own spiritual journey. Maybe most importantly, it tells us that God wants to communicate with us, and that he knows how to speak to us, to each one of us, in a language that we can understand.

The Magi, like all scholars and scientists in the ancient world, studied the stars and the motions of the heavenly bodies with great detail; they believed these things influenced events on earth.

By arranging for a special star to rise at the time of the Incarnation, God, in his infinite mercy and his infinite wisdom, stooped down to their level to tell them about the birth of Jesus: He spoke to them in a language that they understood.

He does the same with us. He speaks to our hearts through the beauty of nature, through the providential events of our lives, through art and literature and friendship and every reality that occupies our attention. He speaks to us through the Church, which preaches God's Word and communicates God's grace in fresh ways in every generation.

He really wants us to find Jesus, to discover the reality of his love and his presence, and he makes star after star rise on our horizons in order to lead us closer to him.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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*Conclusion: Following the Star*

How do we know when God is speaking to us, when he is making a star rise in our hearts?

The surest clue is that deep interior joy, that stirring of the heart, that the Magi experienced when they saw the star. St. Matthew actually describes the Magi as being "overjoyed at seeing the star."

In the midst of our journey of faith, God touches us and guides us through the incomparable satisfaction that we taste deep in our hearts whenever we hear God calling there, whenever we catch a glimpse of the starlight of God's love.

The Magi yearned for more meaningful contact with God, and so, seeing the star, God's promise of and invitation to that contact, filled them with joy.

Our hearts too yearn for more meaningful contact with God, because they yearn for true, lasting happiness, and that can only be found in God — not in popularity, comfort, wealth, or achievements, but only in God.

And so, whenever we hear his voice, whenever we see the star and feel its invitation, we also feel a deep interior joy, a yearning both sweet and sweetly painful, that inspires us to continue forward on our journey. Haven't we all felt that before? Don't we all want to feel it again?

Let's take some time now to remember the stars that God has used to guide us in our Christian lives so far, to look for the star that he is giving us right now, and to ask him for the grace to always recognize and follow every star he sends us, just as the Magi did.

The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

### *Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

- 1 What "language" does God most often use to communicate to my heart? In other words, in what form does the Magi's star tend to appear in my life?
- 2 How is the Star of Bethlehem a proof of God's love for this fallen world? How is it an indication of his love for me personally?
- 3 God had placed in the Magi's hearts a yearning to meet the Savior, and that yearning was a preparation, almost a promise for the future event. What yearnings has God placed in my heart recently? Savor them as promises of future divine interventions.



Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears his glory. Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses. Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow, for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.

– Isaiah 60:1-6, NABRE



Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; for he has come to his people and set them free. He has raised up for us a mighty Savior, born of the house of his servant David. Through his prophets he promised of old that he would save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us. He promised to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant. This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to set us free from the hand of our enemies, free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life... In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

– Luke 1:68-79, NABRE



For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

– Isaiah 49:5-6, NABRE



The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing, as they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils. For the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulder, and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed, as on the day of Midian... For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

– Isaiah 9:1-6, NABRE

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *Troubles Along the Way*

In the ancient world, traveling from Babylon to Bethlehem was tough. The Magi couldn't just hop on a plane, or fill up the gas tank for a comfy road trip. They would have had to travel overland, in some kind of caravan, maybe with camels or donkeys, and it would have taken an extended period of time — weeks if not months.

But starting out on their journey wasn't the only difficulty they faced. Two other hardships made their trip into a troubled pilgrimage. Taking some time to reflect on them will help us face similar hardships in our own pilgrimage of faith.

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### *The Disappearing Star*

The first difficulty they faced was the disappearing star.

When they saw the star arise, they knew that it signaled the birth of the promised Messiah, the King of the Jews, and they decided to go and meet him.

So they set out for the obvious destination, the only logical place, where a King of the Jews could be found: The holy city of the Jews, their religious and political capital, Jerusalem

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### *The Long Way Home*

The Magi had to face a second major difficulty.

This one showed up after they thought they had reached their goal. They made their way to Bethlehem, found Jesus in his mother's arms, and joyfully worshipped him by offering their treasures — precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

At that point, deeply content, they surely thought that their quest was complete; their journey was a success. But God had a different idea. He had more for them to do, to experience, and to suffer. Because they had become subjects and friends of Christ, the new-born King, they had also made new enemies: Any enemy of Christ was now their enemy as well.

And King Herod had made himself an enemy of Christ. He feared that a new-born King of the Jews would usurp his power and disrupt his plans, so instead of welcoming Jesus, Herod sought to destroy him. We know from other historical sources that this Herod was a bloody and unscrupulous tyrant. He was expecting the Magi to report back to him after finding Jesus. But the Magi were warned in a dream not to do so.

Imagine their conversation after that dream. Imagine what a risk it would be for them to not report back to Herod. Surely Herod had informants everywhere. Their departure from Bethlehem would be noticed. If they didn't come back to Jerusalem to report, Herod would pursue them. If he caught them, what would happen? It was not a pleasant consideration. It seemed that their journey was not quite as over as they thought.

In the end, the Magi obeyed God's warning and protected the new-born King, putting their own lives at risk. But to do so, St. Matthew tells us, they had to "depart for their country by another way." They had to take another way home, a longer way, an unfamiliar way, a riskier way: instead of their adventure coming to an end after their joyful encounter with Jesus, it was just beginning.

And the same thing is true in our pilgrimage of faith.

So often we have a powerful experience of God, like the Magi, and we think that we have arrived at full Christian maturity, that it will be smooth sailing from now on. And then, the next day, or the next moment, we find ourselves threatened and pressured and even attacked by some new Herod.

At this point, it seems that the star itself wasn't directly leading them. We know this because St. Matthew later points out that they were overjoyed when the star reappeared to guide them to Bethlehem.

But when they finally arrive at the holy city, things don't go according to their plans: Nobody knows about the new-born King; no one is talking about him; he is not there. The Magi expected to find a royal family with a new child and a city warmed by the presence of a long-awaited Savior.

Imagine their surprise when they entered the city gates and made their first inquiries, and the residents gave them only a puzzled look in response. They seemed to have arrived at their expected destination, but all they found was confusion and disappointment. Without realizing it, they had allowed their own expectations to carry them away. Now they needed to readjust those expectations by a closer examination of God's designs.

Only after stirring up the whole city (St. Matthew tells us that both King Herod and the rest of Jerusalem were "greatly troubled" by the Magi's inquiry) and engaging in a thorough investigation did God intervene again, making the star reappear and lead them to the new-born King. So many times we encounter the same difficulty!

So many times we have an authentic experience of God, we truly hear his voice, we get a real glimpse of a star, and we respond generously and sincerely, setting out on a new phase in our pilgrimage of faith, only to find that our merely human expectations got the better of us, that we hadn't fully understood all that God was telling us.

When that happens, we need to do exactly what the Magi did: Keep inquiring, go the Scriptures, go to the custodian of the Scriptures (the Church), courageously search for how to continue responding to God's will.

And when the time is right, when our inquiry has had the effect that God wishes on the Herods and Jerusalems of the world, the star will reappear to guide us onward.

In fact, Christ himself promised that this would be the case. He told his disciples:



*Seek, and you will find... for the one who keeps on seeking always finds*

— Matthew 7:7-8

We find ourselves moved to continue a difficult pilgrimage, led to follow an unfamiliar and risky path instead of the easier one we already know, asked to put with the discomforts and injustices of a fallen world in spite of having discovered and encountered and worshipped the world's Redeemer.

Whenever we find ourselves in that situation, we need to follow the example of the Magi, trusting in God's providence, obeying his voice, taking the risk of being faithful to our friendship with Christ, even if it means laying our lives on the line.

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### *Conclusion: A Seasonal Journey*

The Magi's life-changing journey following the star is indeed a living parable for our lifelong journey of faith. But it's also a particularly appropriate guide for our littler journey through the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas.

During these seasons, God wants us to experience afresh the joy that comes from seeing the star of his loving and faithful presence in our lives. And to do that, we have to leave aside anything that may be holding us back — whether discouragement at disappointed expectations, or fear of the risks involved in being faithful citizens of Christ's Kingdom.

Let's take few minutes now to contemplate these two difficulties that the Magi faced and overcame, and let's ask our Lord to give us enough light and strength to overcome them too.

The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

### *Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

- 1 When was the last time my expectations didn't line up perfectly with God's plans? How did I react, and why?
- 2 The Magi welcomed Christ's Lordship over their lives and submitted to it, while Herod resisted and tried to destroy it. Why did they react so differently? What types of situations tend to bring out my inner Herod, my inner Magi?

- 3 How often did the Magi think about their destination while they were following the star? How often do I think about the final destination of my pilgrimage of faith? How often should I think about it?

### *Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation*



*Trust in the LORD and do good that you may dwell in the land and live secure. Find your delight in the LORD who will give you your heart's desire. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will act. And make your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like noonday. Be still before the LORD; wait for him.*

— Psalm 37:3-7, NABRE



*Be kind to your servant that I may live, that I may keep your word. Open my eyes to see clearly the wonders of your law. I am a sojourner in the land; do not hide your commandments from me. At all times my soul is stirred with longing for your judgments. With a curse you rebuke the proud who stray from your commandments. Free me from disgrace and contempt, for I keep your testimonies. Though princes meet and talk against me, your servant meditates on your statutes. Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors.*

— Proverbs 19:20-23, NABRE



*Who are you to put God to the test today, setting yourselves in the place of God in human affairs? And now it is the Lord Almighty you are putting to the test, but you will never understand anything! You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or grasp the workings of the human mind; how then can you fathom God, who has made all these things, or discern his mind, or understand his plan? No, my brothers, do not anger the Lord our God... Do not impose conditions on the plans of the Lord our God. God is not like a human being to be moved by threats, nor like a mortal to be cajoled. So while we wait for the salvation that comes from him, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our cry if it pleases him... Besides all this, let us give thanks to the Lord our God for putting us to the test as he did our ancestors.*

...



...

*Recall how he dealt with Abraham, and how he tested Isaac, and all that happened to Jacob in Syrian Mesopotamia while he was tending the flocks of Laban, his mother's brother. He has not tested us with fire, as he did them, to try their hearts, nor is he taking vengeance on us. But the Lord chastises those who are close to him in order to admonish them.*

— Judith 8:12-17, 26-27, NABRE

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### *Investing Our Treasures*

The Magi brought their treasures to Jesus. They offered to the Lord what was most valuable to them. This was their great act of worship, their way of responding to God's call and entering into a personal relationship with God.

That personal relationship with God, what the Catechism calls "to live in communion with God" (CCC 45), gives our lives the meaning we long for. The deeper that communion goes, the deeper our experience of meaning and fulfillment.

One way to make our communion with God deeper and stronger is to follow this example of the Magi, to offer our treasures, what is most valuable to us, to Jesus. Jesus himself calls us to do so in one of his most memorable parables, the Parable of the Talents.

In this parable we discover a very comforting truth: Namely, that everything we do in life — and that means everything, not only praying and going to Mass — can become an act of worship and a means for growing closer to God.

In this conference, we will take some time to understand this parable more fully. We will look at four aspects:

- First, its context — where it appears in the Gospels.
- Second, its central meaning, its core message.
- Third, how it can apply to our lives.
- And fourth, a dangerous misinterpretation of this parable.

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### *The Parable of the Talents*



*It will be as when a man who was going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one — to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.*

*After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. He said, "Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more." His master said to him, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy." [Then] the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, "Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more." His master said to him, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy."*

*Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, "Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back." His master said to him in reply, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return? Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth."*

— Matthew 25:14-30 NABRE

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### *The Context of the Parable*

The parable of the talents appears in two Gospels, Matthew chapter 25 and Luke chapter 19.

In both cases, Jesus tells the parable at the end of his public ministry, during the days immediately preceding his Passion.

Both versions follow a similar structure:

- There is a king who has to leave his kingdom for an extended period of time.
- Before leaving, he entrusts a good amount of wealth to his servants, so they can make use of it during his absence.
- When the king returns, each of his servants gives a report on how they invested their money, and each one receives a reward for doing so.
- Only one servant doesn't receive a reward, the servant who hid his money instead of investing it, instead of making use of it.

That's the basic structure of the parable.

In St. Matthew's Gospel, this parable is one of three parables having to do with the final Judgment, and he emphasizes the importance of keeping that Judgment in mind as we go through our daily lives, so as to keep our priorities straight.

In St. Luke's Gospel, the parable emphasizes that Jesus doesn't establish a political kingdom, but a Kingdom of grace, which will grow and spread through the work of the Church until his Second Coming.

This is the basic context of the parable, and it will be important to keep that context in mind as we dive into exploring what it means for us.

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### *The Core Message of the Parable*

All of Christ's parables have a core message, but it's usually a message so rich in meaning that it can't be completely explained in just one or two statements — and that's precisely why he used parables.

In this case, the core message has to do with the relationship of the servants to the king, and how that relationship is affected by the servants' activities.

Three aspects of that relationship are especially noteworthy.

In the first place, the king wants his servants to be involved in building up his kingdom. He actually leaves his kingdom in their hands, entrusting it to them, in a certain sense. He gives them a share of his wealth and gives them the freedom to use it however they see fit in order to increase the overall wealth and prosperity of the kingdom.

This shows how much he values his servants, how he treats them with dignity and respect, how he wants them to be partners in defending and caring for his kingdom.

In the second place, the king rewards his servants super-abundantly, out of all proportion to their actions. St. Matthew has the king saying to his servants,



*Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.*

– Matthew 25:23

St. Luke has the king specify what those "great responsibilities" are — he puts his servants in charge of various cities, according to how much each servant increased the king's wealth during his absence. Here we see God's hope and dream for each one of us: He wants us to "enter into his joy" and to take part in his own divine activity of governing the universe. In other words, God wants to make us sharers in his own divine nature for all eternity.

At the end of the parable, the distinction of roles between the good servants and the king almost disappears. The servants are elevated to the level of the king himself — this is their reward for faithfully administering the king's gifts during his absence.

In the third place, we see how the actions of one servant cut him off from the kingdom, destroying his relationship with the king. St. Matthew shows the king calling this servant "wicked and lazy," and St. Luke's version calls him simply "wicked."

In both versions, the servant is punished and excluded from the rewards given to the others. The wicked servant didn't put to use the wealth he had received from the king. Instead, he went and hid it; he buried it in the ground. And so, when the king returned, the wicked servant didn't have any profit to show from the wealth he had received.

He gives explanations and makes excuses, but the king doesn't accept them. He tells the servant that he should have invested the wealth he had received; he should have put it to work for the benefit of the kingdom. Because he didn't, because he kept it for himself alone, he is excluded from the kingdom and thrown "into the darkness outside" (Matthew 25:30).

We can see from these three aspects — that the king involves his servants in the work of building up his kingdom, that he rewards his servants by giving them a greater participation in his own life and in his kingdom, and that those who refuse to invest in his kingdom will be excluded from it — that the relationship between the king and his servants is mediated, at least in part, through the servants' activities.

In other words, the servants who receive the king's gifts and use them generously, for the good of the kingdom and not just for their own personal good, actually deepen their relationship, their friendship, with the king.

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### *Applying the Parable to Our Own Lives*

And that is exactly the key point to pay attention to when we want to apply this parable to our own lives.

The king in the parable is Christ himself. The servants are you and me, and all members of the Church. The money that the king gave his servants stands for all the gifts that God has given to us, especially the supernatural gifts like faith and grace, but also all our natural talents and opportunities, and even our sufferings — everything that comes to us from God's providence.

The extended period of the king's absence stands for the entire age of the Church, between Christ's Ascension into heaven and his Second Coming, when the final Judgment will take place. And the message Jesus wants us to hear is that what we do with the gifts we have received, during however much time is allotted to us here on earth, really matters.

Our lives, and so all of our gifts, have a true, meaningful purpose: We are created and called to live in communion with God, in relationship with him, and how we administer our God-given gifts can either foster or frustrate that relationship.

He is the king, the lord of the universe, but he wants us to be part of his royal court, to participate in his work of salvation, to share in his life and in his joy. But he won't force us to do that. He gives us a choice, every day.

We can keep the gifts we have received to ourselves, like the wicked and lazy servant of the parable, or we can take those gifts and invest them so as to increase the wealth of Christ's Kingdom. And the wealth of Christ's Kingdom is measured in terms of love — love for God and love for neighbor.

So the message for us is simple: In order to grow in our relationship with God, the only relationship that will give us the lasting fulfillment we yearn for, we have to invest our gifts in actions of love, of self-giving and self-forgetful generosity towards God and neighbor.

This is one of the ways we bring our treasures — all that we are and all that we have received — to the feet of Jesus and worship him, just as the Three Wise Men did.

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## CONFERENCE

### *Conclusion: A Dangerous Misinterpretation*

Before moving on to the personal questionnaire, we have to pause to point out a dangerous misinterpretation of this parable.

It is possible, especially when we are still at the beginning of our spiritual journey, to interpret this parable through the lens of our own insecurities. Because we live in a fallen world, and because we are fallen human beings wounded by our own sins and by the sins of others around us, we have a deep-seated tendency to doubt our self-worth, to doubt that we can actually be loveable.

When we allow this insecurity to dictate our behavior, we find ourselves trying to earn the love of others, trying to become worthy of being loved through our achievements or some other activity. This is not a healthy way to live, because it is built on a false foundation.

In God's eyes, we already are lovable, infinitely lovable in fact, in spite of our flaws and failings and wounds, and even our sins. This is the radical, wild message of the Gospel, that, as St. Paul put it:



*... God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

— Romans 5:8

In the parable, this comes across clearly, if we are willing to look. The king already shows his interest in his servants and his desire to involve them in his affairs and draw them closer to him by giving them a share in his wealth, by entrusting his kingdom to them. The servants actually have no wealth of their own; they receive all their wealth from the king, because of his devotion to them.

This is our case in relation to God. All that we are, all that we have — life, hope, the earth, faith, friendship — every good thing that exists is a gift from God, a sign of his total love for us and dedication to us.

And so, when the king goes away and gives his servants a chance to invest their gifts for the good of his kingdom, he is not withholding his love from them until they prove themselves worthy.

On the contrary, he is showing his love for them, and hoping that they will return his love with their love, thereby allowing their relationship to grow, to reach a new level.

This is simply how friendship works: It grows when both friends invest themselves in things that matter to both of them.

God, in giving us so many gifts and inviting us to use those gifts to build up his kingdom, is giving us a chance to do just that, to choose to make what matters to God matter also to us, and so deepen our friendship with him.

We don't have to earn God's love; we just have to welcome it.

Take some time now, without rushing, to prayerfully reflect on the ten questions in the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you see new ways to grow in your friendship with the Eternal King.

## Personal Questionnaire

- 1 Make a list of all the natural gifts that I have received from God's goodness, especially the ones that mean the most to me, and thank him for them.
- 2 Make a list of all the supernatural gifts (gifts having to do with Christian faith and life in the Church) that I have received, especially the ones that mean the most to me, and thank him for them.
- 3 Of all these gifts, which ones are my unique ones, ones that most other people don't have?
- 4 Jesus wants to be able to say to me, at the end of my life, "Come, share your master's joy!" (Matthew 25:21). Use my imagination to think about what that might mean, what that will be like.
- 5 What may have been some of the difficulties that the servants faced during the king's absence? How do those relate to the difficulties that Christians face during this age of the Church, before Christ's Second Coming?
- 6 What may have motivated the wicked, lazy servant to keep his gift for himself, instead of investing it for the good of the larger kingdom? Why do I sometimes hesitate to invest my gifts for the good of Christ's Kingdom?
- 7 Think about the times I have put my gifts to use for God's Kingdom in the past. What happened? How did it make me feel and why?
- 8 Think about the times I have kept my gifts to myself, preferring to keep them safe rather than to risk losing them. What happened? How did it make me feel and why?

9 How can I better invest the gifts God has given me for the good of his Kingdom? Ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten me about this.

10 What situations or circumstances make me doubt that God can really love me? How do I usually react to those doubts? How would God prefer me to react?

Horizontal lines for writing answers to questions 9 and 10.

NOTES

Record Your Thoughts Here

Horizontal lines for taking notes.

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## APPENDIX

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*Sermon of Pope Benedict XVI on the Three Magi, Vigil for World Youth Day, Cologne, 2005*

Dear young friends,

In our pilgrimage with the mysterious Magi from the East, we have arrived at the moment which St Matthew describes in his Gospel with these words: “Going into the house (over which the star had halted), they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him” (Mt 2: 11). Outwardly, their journey was now over. They had reached their goal.

But at this point a new journey began for them, an inner pilgrimage which changed their whole lives. Their mental picture of the infant King they were expecting to find must have been very different. They had stopped at Jerusalem specifically in order to ask the King who lived there for news of the promised King who had been born. They knew that the world was in disorder, and for that reason their hearts were troubled.

They were sure that God existed and that he was a just and gentle God. And perhaps they also knew of the great prophecies of Israel foretelling a King who would be intimately united with God, a King who would restore order to the world, acting for God and in his Name.

It was in order to seek this King that they had set off on their journey: deep within themselves they felt prompted to go in search of the true justice that can only come from God, and they wanted to serve this King, to fall prostrate at his feet and so play their part in the renewal of the world. They were among those “who hunger and thirst for justice” (Mt 5: 6). This hunger and thirst had spurred them on in their pilgrimage — they had become pilgrims in search of the justice that they expected from God, intending to devote themselves to its service.

Even if those who had stayed at home may have considered them Utopian dreamers, they were actually people with their feet on the ground, and they knew that in order to change the world it is necessary to have power. Hence, they were hardly likely to seek the promised child anywhere but in the King’s palace. Yet now they were bowing down before the child of poor people, and they soon came to realize that Herod, the King they had consulted, intended to use his power to lay a trap for him, forcing the family to flee into exile.

The new King, to whom they now paid homage, was quite unlike what they were expecting. In this way they had to learn that God is not as we usually imagine him to be. This was where their inner journey began. It started at the very moment when they knelt down before this child and recognized him as the promised King. But they still had to assimilate these joyful gestures internally.

They had to change their ideas about power, about God and about man, and in so doing, they also had to change themselves. Now they were able to see that God’s power is not like that of the powerful of this world. God’s ways are not as we imagine them or as we might wish them to be.

God does not enter into competition with earthly powers in this world. He does not marshal his divisions alongside other divisions. God did not send 12 legions of angels to assist Jesus in the Garden of Olives (cf. Mt 26: 53). He contrasts the noisy and ostentatious power of this world with the defenceless power of love, which succumbs to death on the Cross and dies ever anew throughout history; yet it is this same love which constitutes the new divine intervention that opposes injustice and ushers in the Kingdom of God.

God is different — this is what they now come to realize. And it means that they themselves must now become different, they must learn God’s ways.

They had come to place themselves at the service of this King, to model their own kingship on his. That was the meaning of their act of homage, their adoration. Included in this were their gifts — gold, frankincense and myrrh — gifts offered to a King held to be divine. Adoration has a content and it involves giving. Through this act of adoration, these men from the East wished to recognize the child as their King and to place their own power and potential at his disposal, and in this they were certainly on the right path.

By serving and following him, they wanted, together with him, to serve the cause of good and the cause of justice in the world. In this they were right.

Now, though, they have to learn that this cannot be achieved simply through issuing commands from a throne on high. Now they have to learn to give themselves — no lesser gift would be sufficient for this King. Now they have to learn that their lives must be conformed to this divine way of exercising power, to God's own way of being.

They must become men of truth, of justice, of goodness, of forgiveness, of mercy. They will no longer ask: how can this serve me? Instead, they will have to ask: How can I serve God's presence in the world? They must learn to lose their life and in this way to find it. Having left Jerusalem behind, they must not deviate from the path marked out by the true King, as they follow Jesus.

Dear friends, what does all this mean for us?

What we have just been saying about the nature of God being different, and about the way our lives must be shaped accordingly, sounds very fine, but remains rather vague and unfocused. That is why God has given us examples. The Magi from the East are just the first in a long procession of men and women who have constantly tried to gaze upon God's star in their lives, going in search of the God who has drawn close to us and shows us the way.

It is the great multitude of the saints — both known and unknown — in whose lives the Lord has opened up the Gospel before us and turned over the pages; he has done this throughout history and he still does so today. In their lives, as if in a great picture-book, the riches of the Gospel are revealed. They are the shining path which God himself has traced throughout history and is still tracing today.

My venerable Predecessor Pope John Paul II, who is with us at this moment, beatified and canonized a great many people from both the distant and the recent past. Through these individuals he wanted to show us how to be Christian: how to live life as it should be lived — according to God's way. The saints and the blessed did not doggedly seek their own happiness, but simply wanted to give themselves, because the light of Christ had shone upon them.

They show us the way to attain happiness, they show us how to be truly human. Through all the ups and downs of history, they were the true reformers who constantly rescued it from plunging into the valley of darkness; it was they who constantly shed upon it the light that was needed to make sense — even in the midst of suffering — of God's words spoken at the end of the work of creation: "It is very good".

One need only think of such figures as St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Charles Borromeo, the founders of 19-century religious orders who inspired and guided the social movement, or the saints of our own day — Maximilian Kolbe, Edith Stein, Mother Teresa, Padre Pio. In contemplating these figures we learn what it means "to adore" and what it means to live according to the measure of the Child of Bethlehem, by the measure of Jesus Christ and of God himself.

The saints, as we said, are the true reformers. Now I want to express this in an even more radical way: only from the saints, only from God does true revolution come, the definitive way to change the world.

In the last century we experienced revolutions with a common programme — expecting nothing more from God, they assumed total responsibility for the cause of the world in order to change it. And this, as we saw, meant that a human and partial point of view was always taken as an absolute guiding principle. Absolutizing what is not absolute but relative is called totalitarianism. It does not liberate man, but takes away his dignity and enslaves him.

It is not ideologies that save the world, but only a return to the living God, our Creator, the guarantor of our freedom, the guarantor of what is really good and true. True revolution consists in simply turning to God who is the measure of what is right and who at the same time is everlasting love. And what could ever save us apart from love?

Dear friends! Allow me to add just two brief thoughts.

There are many who speak of God; some even preach hatred and perpetrate violence in God's Name. So it is important to discover the true face of God. The Magi from the East found it when they knelt down before the Child of Bethlehem. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father", said Jesus to Philip (Jn 14:9). In Jesus Christ, who allowed his heart to be pierced for us, the true face of God is seen. We will follow him together with the great multitude of those who went before us. Then we will be travelling along the right path.

This means that we are not constructing a private God, we are not constructing a private Jesus, but that we believe and worship the Jesus who is manifested to us by the Sacred Scriptures and who reveals himself to be alive in the great procession of the faithful called the Church, always alongside us and always before us.

There is much that could be criticized in the Church. We know this and the Lord himself told us so: it is a net with good fish and bad fish, a field with wheat and darnel.

Pope John Paul II, as well as revealing the true face of the Church in the many saints that he canonized, also asked pardon for the wrong that was done in the course of history through the words and deeds of members of the Church. In this way he showed us our own true image and urged us to take our place, with all our faults and weaknesses, in the procession of the saints that began with the Magi from the East.

It is actually consoling to realize that there is darnel in the Church. In this way, despite all our defects, we can still hope to be counted among the disciples of Jesus, who came to call sinners.

The Church is like a human family, but at the same time it is also the great family of God, through which he establishes an overarching communion and unity that embraces every continent, culture and nation. So we are glad to belong to this great family that we see here; we are glad to have brothers and friends all over the world.

Here in Cologne we discover the joy of belonging to a family as vast as the world, including Heaven and earth, the past, the present, the future and every part of the earth. In this great band of pilgrims we walk side by side with Christ, we walk with the star that enlightens our history.

"Going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him" (Mt 2: 11). Dear friends, this is not a distant story that took place long ago. It is with us now. Here in the Sacred Host he is present before us and in our midst. As at that time, so now he is mysteriously veiled in a sacred silence; as at that time, it is here that the true face of God is revealed. For us he became a grain of wheat that falls on the ground and dies and bears fruit until the end of the world (cf. Jn 12: 24).

He is present now as he was then in Bethlehem. He invites us to that inner pilgrimage which is called adoration. Let us set off on this pilgrimage of the spirit and let us ask him to be our guide. Amen.