WE, INDETERMINATE NUMBER OF KINGS...

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What is the message of the Magi and how do they fit into Matthew's Gospel?
Category: Bible & Mission

Tomorrow is January the sixth, the day by which you are supposed to take down the Christmas decorations and stick them back in the loft for another 11 months. It's also the day when some people focus on the arrival of the Magi to worship Jesus; a story told in Matthew's Gospel.

To be honest, Matthew doesn't tell us much about the Magi/Wise Men/Kings. He doesn't even spell out what the Magi actually were.Â Â The only other mention of a magus (singular of magi) in the New Testament is Simon Magus inÂ Acts 8 and he was definitely a bad guy, which makes for an interesting comparison. We know that they brought at least three gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh), but that doesn't tell us how many Magi there were; we haven't a clue about their number.

However, the narrative about the Magi is pretty well-worn. No doubt some people will post pictures on Facebook, tomorrow, showing heroic looking men on camels with the words "Wise men still seek Jesus". The message is clear, the Magi came from the East to worship Jesus, so we should worship him too. In one sense, you can't argue with this, it's a good message, an important message. But...

The problem with this reading (and the thousands of sermons based on it) is that it makes the whole point of the narrative to be about us and about our reaction and stops us looking at the broader picture of what Matthew is doing in his Gospel.

The first thing to remember is that Matthew's Gospel is the most 'Jewish' of the four. It focuses on Jesus in relationship to the people of Israel and on his fulfilment of the Old Testament law and prophets. In which case, it is rather odd that right at the start of the actual narrative, we have a story of some pagan astrologers coming to celebrate his birth. So, what's going on?

The Magi almost certainly weren't kings, but their story is all about kingship; in particular, the contrasting claims of Herod and Jesus. Herod might have been king, but his claim to the throne was dubious at best. Jesus was just a baby born to a poor family, but as Matthew demonstrated in his long genealogy in Chapter 1, Jesus was very much part of the Jewish royal line. The Magi, with their precious gifts, provide international recognition and confirmation of the point that Matthew has already made; Jesus is the one with real authority.

This is important, because this theme of Jesus international authority is revisited right at the end of Matthew's Gospel. In words that are familiar to Kouyanet readers:

> *Jesus came and told his disciples, â€œI have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations,Â baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Â Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.â€*

Jesus authority is underlined once more, but now the response is not for people to be drawn to Israel (as the Magi were) but to go out into the world to make disciples. Matthew'sÂ *Jewish* Gospel is

framed by these two events which illustrate Jesus wider power and the international dimension of his message, which is great news for those of us who are not Jewish.

So, our response to the story of the Magi should not simply be to come to Jesus to worship him, it should also spur us on to make disciples.

Wise Men and Women are still sent out by Jesus into their neighbourhoods, across the nation and into the world!