

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage” (Matthew 2:2).

The most remarkable thing about the magi who came from “the East” seeking the newborn Jesus is that they were not Jews, which immediately raises the question: why did these Gentiles, or non-Jews, travel for miles through inhospitable terrain to pay homage to a newborn Jewish king? Before we can answer that question, we need to answer some more fundamental ones, such as: how did the magi know that the star signified the Jewish king’s birth, and how did they even notice the star in the first place?

The answer to all three questions is the fact that the magi were looking. These magi were learned men of their time from ancient Persia or Arabia, and astrology was part of their study, so they kept their eyes fixed on the heavens. In ancient astrology, the appearance of a new star meant the birth of a king, and the magi ascertained that this new king had been born in the kingdom of Herod based on their observation of the star’s position, thus they deduced that he must be king of the Jews. Magi, or wise men, were also trusted royal advisors, sharing in their king’s royal office and authority, hence the early recognition of these magi as kings. It was common practice for kings of that time to visit or send royal emissaries, bearing gifts, to other kings, to see and assess who the other kings were and so get a better sense of their own position on the world stage. That is why and how these Gentile magi made their journey seeking the newborn king of the Jews – they were looking.

One of the great lessons for us to take away as we celebrate the feast of Epiphany and commemorate the journey of the magi is to always be looking too. We need to look beyond ourselves and the two feet in front of our face to our ultimate goal, keeping our eyes open to see the signs that God gives us in our lives showing us the way. We need to look more deeply into our faith so that we can interpret those signs and know where they lead. And, above all, we need to look to Christ, the supreme revelation of God and his will for us, to see who God really is and to learn our place in his plan. As we conclude the Christmas season, in which we, like the magi, have gazed on the newborn king of the Jews, may we renew our commitment to keep our gaze on him and follow him ever-more faithfully through the new year.