

*A Tale of Two Cities: "They entered the house, saw the child ... and worshiped him."*

Sacred texts are full of freighted words that bear deep meanings. After the temple was destroyed, Isaiah dreamed of a grand and glorious second temple (Is 60:1-14). But when the exiles returned to Jerusalem what they managed to construct was pathetic when compared with the great temple of Solomon that they had lost (Hag 2:3-9).

Centuries passed and Herod the Great achieved supreme power over the Holy Land which he exercised with brutality. In 19 BC, wanting to win favor with his subjects Herod began construction of a second temple that became the grandest sacred enclosure in the whole of the Roman Empire. By 11 BC it was nearly completed and functioning. The exterior walls stretched for two-thirds of a mile. Some of the stones in that great wall weighed over 100 tons and were more than 40 feet long. More than 1,500,000 square feet of polished, imported marble provided elegant flooring for the 35 acres of sacred space. The front of the central sanctuary was covered with plates of solid gold. Any traveler arriving from the East, over the Mount of Olives, had to shield his eyes due to the brilliance of the reflected light of the sun on the gold covered porch. That porch was ninety feet high and on it Herod constructed a great golden vine whose clusters were the height of a man. The double doors at the main entrance took twenty men to open or close. And who was allowed to enter that house of splendor?

The structure was called "the house." The inner courtyards were accessible only to priests and the holy-of-holies was entered once a year by a single visitor, the chief priest. None of the inner courts were open to non-Jews. Indeed, stone signs set in a low wall around the inner courts sternly warned all non-Jews who approached "the house" that if they entered beyond that wall they would be killed.

The wise men in Matthew's text entered the land from the East and thus crossed over the Mount of Olives. They were thereby witnesses from afar to the grandeur of "the house." More pilgrims came to Jerusalem to gaze at these wonders than visited Rome. But only Jews could enter. Years later, Paul was almost killed because a rumor circulated in the holy city that he had brought a Greek beyond "the court of the Gentiles" into those inner courts. The "wise men" were summoned to an audience with King Herod but to enter "the house" was unthinkable for them or for Herod, because he was racially an Arab. After disappointment, the star that had brought the Magi thus far, reappeared and led them on.

On arriving in Bethlehem, Matthew records simply, "and going into *the house* they saw the child with his mother and fell down and worshiped him." There were no long rows of 30 foot high marble pillars holding up the roof and no plates of solid gold covering the outside walls. The door was not 40 feet high and did not require 20 men to open it. But they were *invited in* with all of their foreignness and there they found - not an empty darkened room isolated by a heavy curtain, but - instead - *a child!* On finding him they fell down and *worshiped him*.

Herod built "the house" (in Jerusalem) and created unmatched earthly splendor, but the travelers from the East were not welcome in it. They searched out "the house" (in Bethlehem) and found a *child* who was worthy to be worshiped. It was a "tale of two cities."

Beyond the glitter of the malls, may their journey become our journey this Christmas time.