

One of my favorite kinds of fictional stories is the kind that turns on situational irony. Like in *Chinatown*, where the main character, a detective, tells more than one potential client that they might be better off not knowing what they want to hire him to find out. They don't believe him — they're sure they want to know — and sure enough, knowing doesn't make their lives better. Perhaps ironically, one of my least favorite kinds of life experiences is also the kind that turns on situational irony.

In *Chinatown*, the detective opens up to a client he's gotten close to and tells her that in his own life, he once tried to help someone and she ended up getting hurt. The way he says it tells the audience that she wasn't hurt, she was killed, and he's never forgiven himself, even though he had the best of intentions. Or in my own life, there have been times when I tried to make a friend feel better, and inadvertently ended up doing just the opposite, and while I've told myself that I had good intentions and didn't know everything I needed to know, so I shouldn't feel bad, I still do.

Not nearly as bad as the Magi should have felt, though. We don't like to look at this story too closely. We love the exoticism, the romance, the idea of getting valuable gifts just for letting strangers into our homes — well, actually, that could end up having unintended consequences too. And the people who decided what parts of the Bible we'd hear when might have felt that way too, because they end the Gospel reading before we hear about the unintended consequence of the Magi telling Herod about the birth of Jesus. They may have thought they knew what they were dealing with, but, believe me, they didn't. But Herod didn't know, either. He wasn't just "frightened," he was threatened, because he thought a competing earthly ruler had been born, so he did the same thing history tells us he did when he thought his own children were looking just a little too ambitious, a little too eager to take his place before his time: he ordered the death of every child in Bethlehem under the age of two.

Now, I should note that there is no other ancient source that corroborates St. Matthew's account of this gruesome order. Modernist critics have said that means that Matthew "must" have fabricated the episode. Maybe. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It's certainly the way Herod would have reacted to news like that of the Magi. So it's possible that since in those days, the culture considered peasant children of little value, the event simply didn't seem worth mentioning to other historians. It's possible that there were no children of that age in the little town of Bethlehem, or even that the Magi or the Holy Family shared the news of danger they had received from God, and the dreadful order could not be carried out. Or maybe a confidant told him, "Forget it Herod, it's Bethlehem." Though that *does* seem unlikely. People don't usually stick their necks out like that, challenging authority, especially cruel authority. What a pity.

On the other hand, St. Matthew does tell us that the Magi were content to obey God by disobeying Herod, and that's something. Because the point of the story is not that God's plan is dependent upon human beings getting life right, but rather, God's

plan is a response to human beings getting life wrong, and therefore, God's plan of redemption is the great hope of humanity.

Even when we act with the best of intentions, like the so-called "wise men," we might realize we've been astonishingly foolish when we see the big picture. And the Epiphany for which this feast day is named is not so much about stars or wise men or camels or gifts, but rather, a very big picture indeed. The big picture that St. Paul saw, that in Jesus Christ, "through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known," because God has made it possible for everyone, truly everyone, to have a relationship with God, and such a relationship will do for us and for the world better things than we ever could do alone, even with the best of intentions.

So the question is not, Are we good enough? We are not. The Magi stirred up trouble, plunked down their gifts, and left. But God got good use out of them anyway. Because the question is, will we respond to what God asks us to do? For, as imperfect as it was, the journey of the Magi was an affirmative response to what God had requested of them, and they did far more than provide for the material needs of the Holy Family. They weren't prophets, or even members of the same religion, but they unwittingly fulfilled prophecies of other nations coming to the light of God in Israel, and so they served as forerunners of the expansion of the Jesus movement from Israel to the ends of the Earth.

We can outdo the Magi: we can be wiser than they were, for as Christians, we are members of a covenant relationship with God, and therefore we are closer to God than the Magi were. As the source of all wisdom, God is more than good enough, and through Jesus and his church, we can choose to do more than the Magi did. They made one journey, but we can make our whole lives a sacred journey to God. But for any of this to happen, we must choose to act, and not merely be glad that we know what good things we could do. Or as a good friend of mine put it, when God tells you to do something, hop on your camel and go!

We can choose to trust Christ and his Church, not earthly rulers and their courts. We can choose to dedicate all we have and our whole selves to God, not just what we can spare to leave behind. If we make those our intentions, then our intentions will be good enough, our situation will be quite unironic, and both we and the world will be better off from knowing God.