If you remember the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* there is a scene where Butch and Sundance are being pursued by a posse and every time they fail to lose them they ask the question, “Who are those guys?” I thought of this today because it is also a fair question for us to ask about the Gospel lesson and the visit of the Magi. Despite the Magi being pretty famous, their identity is still a bit mysterious and even their hit single (We Three Kings) seems to take a few liberties with what the Gospel actually tells us. And for a little trivia Matthew is the only Gospel that even mentions them and, in contrast to the song, he gives no specific number, name, nor royal title. Here is all that he says just in case you were not listening earlier, “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’” There is then a bit about Herod and then we hear, “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” That’s it. They are from the east, they saw a star and they gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Now the gifts themselves offer some fairly straightforward interpretations. Symbolically gold represents Christ’s kingship, frankincense is a symbol of his priestly role, and myrrh is a prefiguring of his death and embalming. Of course this isn’t the only interpretation. A more Biblical one argues that the gifts are a proclamation of the divine nature of Jesus by relying on the prophet Isaiah who says in chapter sixty verse six, “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” And there is even an interpretation that says these were not symbolic gifts at all or statements about Christ’s divinity but actually quite practical, at least in terms of the frankincense, which was used to relive arthritis in the ancient world. But whether these gifts were symbolic, proper gifts for the King of Kings or just a way to get a little joint relief we still have not answered the question of who those guys are.

I have to say that for many years my little English major brain tended to think of these wise men as a literary device to get the audience up to speed on just who Jesus was, sort of like how Auric Goldfinger explains his whole Fort Knox gold radiation plot within earshot of James Bond. But what if it’s not just a literary device, suppose it really happened, it brings us back to the question of not only who are those guys but what can we learn from them.

So let’s start with who they were. In the original Greek the term that gets translated as wise men is the word *magoi*, which can also be translated as "astrologers", or, as in the only other New Testament occurrence (Acts 13:6, 8) "magician" or "sorcerer." This word is also used to define a priestly class of Persians or Babylonians who were experts in the occult, such as astrology and the interpretation of dreams. If you want a little etymological fun (and who doesn’t) *magoi* is also the Greek word from where the English word magic comes. And just to be grumpy it should be noted that the word has nothing to do with the word kings. So how did these guys become three kings and get names? Well it would take a while. For example Origen, the third century theologian, was the first to assert that there were three of them. This was probably the result of the three gifts. Their traditional names of Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar were not mentioned until the sixth century in a work known as *Excerpta Latina Barbari* (a real bodice ripper I am told)*.* As to the idea of them being kings comes from places like Psalm 72 which says, “May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him. May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts.” In the middle ages these guys became a pretty big deal and the town of Milan even claimed to have their relics. That is until Frederick Barbarossa conquered Milan and brought them to Germany in 1162, where they reside to this day. If you would like to see them they are in Cologne Cathedral.

So it would seem in all of this that if we take the earliest document, which would be the Gospel of Matthew, the picture that emerges is that these were most likely pagan priests who used astrology to determine where Jesus had been born. So now the question we need to ask is what can we take from this? Are we to break out our horoscopes and see if it is a good time to begin a journey or an auspicious day to start a new relationship? Well I would probably recommend against that interpretation not least because the Old Testament is not real big on Astrology or anything of the occult saying things like, “A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, their blood is upon them” (Leviticus 20:27). And so if this is the case, why would Matthew, the most Jewish of all the New Testament writers, not only point out that these guys came, but make them somewhat awesome? For that answer I think we need to acknowledge something and that is the fact that most of us came to faith through imperfect means. I do not think any of us out of the womb were spiritual giants. We fumbled around in our attempt to grasp God. For myself I quite paradoxically came to mature faith through the writings of Jacques Derrida (which is probably a topic for another day). But for those of you fortunate enough to have escaped Derrida’s writings he was an Algerian born French atheist who makes reading agrarian legal briefs in Welsh seem exciting. But God can work all things for his good. And so the lesson is not that we should break out our astrology charts to see if Pluto is on the nadir, but rather realize that the imperfect can still reflect a bit of the perfect.

The Magi from the east were not Christian when they saw Jesus’ star rising, they were going about things the way they always had. But the thing is and the reason why we remember them is because they converted. Their imperfect, and if we follow the Old Testament, wicked means by which they tried to find truth pointed them towards the ultimate truth. And more important they were willing to be converted, they were willing to kneel down and pay him homage. If we are going to add things to the story what I would like to add would not be their names, or royal titles but I would like to say that the story ended with them not only becoming but remaining the first gentile converts to Christianity. I would like to think of this as the moment where everything changed, where they submitted their lives totally to the lordship of Jesus Christ and stopped looking to other ways to satisfy the longing in their souls, which only God can fill. And so as we think what we can learn from the Magi, I think it is that no matter how we came to faith we must continue being faithful. As St. Paul puts it in 1st Corinthians, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” Have we put an end to our childish ways or do we still go back to them now and then, hoping to find something that only God can provide? The Magi put away their childish things today and bowed to the one true God. That is the example they have left us whether they were royal or had cool names, they converted to the worship of God almighty following him that day and forevermore.