

Sermon, Feast of the Epiphany

Sunday, 8th January, 2023, Brookton and Beverley

St Matthew's account of the visit of the wise men is rather "lean" – they followed a star, they met a nasty king, they found what they came to see, they were joyful, they worshipped what they came to see, they offered important gifts, and they went home by another means so to avoid the nasty king. We learn little about these men, or their journey which must have taken some time, and then only a fleeting insight into how one part of the journey affected them. Imagine if someone were to uncover in one of the great libraries of Iraq or Iran their manuscript, telling the story of the journey of the wise men to and from Jerusalem, to worship a baby in Bethlehem?! I imagine I am not alone in wondering what must have been their experiences; the wise men are yet another set of characters in the Bible story who enter "centre stage" suddenly, and just as suddenly, disappear. I think of Ananias in the story of Saul's dramatic conversion experience or the men on the road to Emmaus who experience according to the twenty-seventh verse of chapter twenty-four of St Luke's Gospel "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." What insights might we as ordinary followers of Jesus Christ have learned from hearing of the experiences and understandings of these characters?

As we are all too aware Christmas can be a time dominated by the buying and giving of gifts. While giving presents to others can be a lovely activity I was taken by a comment I read recently that it can be very easy in our consumeristic culture to see a church service as just another place to "get" something and therefore we need be careful not to think as consumers in our spiritual life, instead of coming to God with our offering of worship, and "sacrifice of praise".

To that end during the Season of Christmas and the Epiphany the story of the Wise Men bringing their gifts to the Christ Child can be a helpful reminder of the kinds of "gifts" that God wants from us as well. While we might conjecture as to what these wise men did for work, as it were, I think it is not wrong to think of them as people who might have been leaders of some kind in their community; some scholars have suggested they were religious professors, philosophers, or scholars, highly educated in many fields, including religion, astronomy, and even astrology. Given this level of knowledge and expertise they might well have had influence as political advisors or even "king-makers" in their own land. Given their background it seems unlikely that they were men who would risk their lives to make this journey as part of a political move, or as a teaching experience. They were traveling from the Far East to worship "he who has been born king of the Jews". When they

finally find the place where the Christ Child was staying, they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy,” fell down on their faces before Jesus and Mary and worshiped him, an appropriate reaction when in the presence of the King of Kings.

Then they opened their treasures and presented to the young Jesus three types of gifts: Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is to these gifts I wish to turn for surely, they were not random gifts that had lying around.

Such gifts were each significant at the time and continue to have important meanings for us today.

1. Gold is a precious metal that has been used for jewellery, ornaments, currency, and idols throughout human history because of its colour and shine.
2. Frankincense is an expensive fragrance or perfume made from trees in India and Arabia.
3. Myrrh is a specific kind of costly perfume made from rare thorn bushes in Arabia and Ethiopia that is used as an antiseptic anointing oil and embalming fluid.

It is worth noting that not only were these gifts not random, but they would also have been rare and very costly for the Wise Men to give to Jesus and his family. Having said that, I understand they were not unheard of as gifts in first-century Palestine.

Of the three gifts, surely myrrh must seem the most unusual, and if not at face value, an inappropriate choice for a family with a newborn child - embalming liquid is not a gift for a baby! Gold and perfume might seem rather lovely “Christmas gifts;” perhaps you received some!

I think we can appreciate these gifts were expensive and therefore demonstrated the level of sacrificial love and worship the Wise Men had for this newborn King; as such theirs was a gesture of adulation. The Wise Men came not to purchase anything with their gifts, the gifts were elements of their praise. Of course, God needs none of our gifts for as the apostles preached in the Book of Acts:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all humanity life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of humanity to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward

him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being”.

These gifts have deeper spiritual Meaning. The ancient church understood that these three gifts clearly symbolised three key aspects of Christ’s identity. The gold points to Jesus’ royalty, the frankincense to his divinity, and the myrrh to his humanity. To that end you could argue that through their gift-giving, the Wise Men “preached” the gospel in a tangible way; whether they fully knew it or not, their gifts told the story of how God himself, who came down from Heaven as our King (gold) to fulfill his priestly duties (frankincense), and eventually die for our sins (myrrh).

Since the gift of myrrh was the oddest gift, it especially points forward to the day that Jesus would die for the sins of the world. This gift was given to Jesus here at the beginning of his life as well as at the end of his life when he was hanging on the cross and then was being buried in the tomb). Thankfully for humanity, though, that burial was only temporary — because three days later he rose again; because of his resurrection, we can have eternal life.

Today, as we recall the “first Christmas”, let us remember that the main message behind the story of the Wise Men, their gift-giving, and all the rest of Advent and Christmas, is that Jesus Christ came to earth to die to offer salvation for sinners — meaning you and me. Let us [pray](#) we do not lose sight of that. Secondly, just as the Wise Men responded to the heavenly light above them by going and worshiping Jesus, the Christmas season calls upon us to respond to Jesus in one way or another. In the Nativity narrative everyone responds – we see it in the stories of the angels, the shepherds, the older saints in the temple (Simeon and Anna), and even Herod (who responded to the news of a king by trying to kill him). The importance for us is that Christmas presents us with the gospel, and the gospel demands a response!

For Christians, Christmas also calls us to worship. However, we have to choose what we worship and that is about choosing to worship Jesus over *everything else*. As Jesus is the only true King, when we bow our hearts to him and lay our precious “gifts” before him, “then we are saying that he alone can satisfy our hearts.” The Good News is that Jesus the King never turns away from any heart that is open to him; those who seek him will find him every time.