

“The Gifts of Faith”
Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

In the Gospel of Matthew we’re told that some time after the birth of Jesus -- perhaps even as much as two years after the event -- “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’ ” (2:1-2). This story has always figured largely in most celebrations of Christmas. In the Christian Church Year this event is observed at **Epiphany**, a date which fell on January 6th in our New Year. Epiphany is a time when we celebrate that Jesus Christ didn’t only come for the Jews, but that he came for all the nations, indeed, for the whole world. The wise men are representatives of people of other nations and of other faiths who have come to worship the Christ.

Because it is an event upon which the imagination may easily take hold, it has been embellished widely both in literature and art. From the Bible we know very little about the **“wise men.”** Millions of Christmas cards show **“three oriental kings”** presenting gifts to a tiny child in a manger. Our new Book of Praise (1997) has the well known carol, “We three kings of orient are” in it and we will sing it this morning. But we do not actually know that there were three who brought the gifts; we only infer from the number of gifts that were presented that there were three presenters. Further, we’re not told that they were actually “kings”; they were “wise men” – sometimes called “magi” – perhaps they were astrologers or philosophers. Then too, it is likely, in view of their long journey and the actions of Herod subsequent to their arrival to have all male babies two years of age and under killed, that the wise men arrived when the infant Jesus had already become a young child.

The story is simplicity itself. The details are told in twelve short verses. Although we know very little about these wise men, we do know that they came looking for one who was said to have “been born the king of the Jews.” Some kind of constellation of the heavens or **“star”** had guided them to Jerusalem, where they inquired for more detail at King Herod’s court. They made their way to Bethlehem where they found the child and they worshipped him and presented him gifts of gold, incense and myrrh.

And then, because they were warned to have nothing further to do with Herod, they wisely “left for their own country by another road” (2:12b). Perhaps the fact that so little information is given about them shows that Matthew’s interest wasn’t focussed upon the wise men themselves. Rather, he was likely more interested in the fact that even **the “Gentiles” -- the representatives of “other nations,”** as well as the

Jewish shepherds, had come to worship the Jewish Messiah. Perhaps he was also interested in the significance of the gifts they brought.

Certainly, it's easy to see that a literary critic or biblical expositor might draw special attention to **the three gifts of the wise men**, for these are mentioned at the end of the story, a place of prominence, after the child has been found. "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" (Matt. 2:11).

1. **Gold, the metal of kings.**

It's easy to see why **gold** is an appropriate gift for Jesus Christ. Gold is the metal of kings. We don't actually know in what form the gold was presented to him – whether it was rendered in coins or some costly, beautiful object – but we do know that when the gold was presented to Jesus, it acknowledged his right to rule.

If you've ever travelled and seen archaeological finds in museums you will know what I mean. All the great early civilizations conjoin **gold and the glorious reign of their kings**. The Egyptians gave gold to their pharaohs in life and in death. Think only of the shining treasure trove that adorned **Tutenkhamen's** grave, found by the Englishman, Carter in 1922, in the Valley of the Kings in upper Egypt. In the ruins of the town of Mycenae, which dates in its earliest strata from the time of the Trojan War, there was found in an ancient cemetery, the elaborate death mask of an ancient king, possibly **Agammemnon's**, made out of pure gold. A few years ago I saw some of **King Priam's** gold, taken from Henry Aeschliemann's famous find in Troy, first displayed in a German museum and which, later stolen by the Soviets during the dying days of the Second World War, is now found in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. I gather from a National Geographic article several years ago, that archaeologists have also found **Phillip of Macedon's** and his wife's, **Philippa's**, gold funerary boxes and the ashes in them adorned with solid golden oak leaves. Gold is the sign of wealth and power and royalty.

I wonder, **what did Jesus and his family do with the gold** that the wise men presented to him? They weren't rich or powerful enough to keep or hoard it. It's been suggested that it may well have provided them with the funds necessary to escape to Egypt to avoid Herod's murderous wrath. Though probably true, the actual useful and monetary value of the gold was far overshadowed by the significance of the gift itself.

Jesus Christ was born to be a king, the "King of the nations," the "King of all Kings

(Rev. 15:3c; 17:14). Somehow, the wise men seemed to know that. Somehow their coming with gifts seemed to fulfill Isaiah's and the psalmist's prophecies that many would come to honor the Messiah's kingship and give gifts to him (Isa. 60:1-7; Ps. 72:10-11,15a). Ironically, Jesus was never again to have very much to do with gold. Apparently he remained relatively poor all his life. He himself reminded us that his "kingdom is not from this world" (Jn. 18:36a). Paul later reminded Christians to remember that "though [the Lord Jesus] was rich [beyond telling] yet for [our] sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Nevertheless, the wise men pointed to Jesus Christ's true kingship with their gold.

2. Frankincense, a sweet-smelling substance of worship and praise.

Can you see why frankincense was a significant gift? For thousands of years frankincense, culled from the sap of **the Boswellia tree** found in the horn of Africa, had been prized for its aromatic properties and usefulness in perfumes and incense. It was used in that way in the worship services in the Temple in Jerusalem, much as it is used in some Roman Catholic, Anglican and many eastern Orthodox worship services today. Since frankincense gave off such a strong, sweet odour, it was probably of incense that Paul was thinking when he compared the gifts of his own Philippian friends to such an offering, calling it "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18 NIV).

In presenting this gift, perhaps the wise men were pointing to Jesus Christ as the great High Priest, the one whose whole life was acceptable and well-pleasing to his Father in heaven (Heb. 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:5, 10; 7:26-28 etc.). Jesus Christ was to become the great intermediary, the bridge "over troubled water" between God and humankind.

More than that, the wise men presented incense to Jesus because they had come to **worship** him. The passage emphasizes this by repeating the phrase that they had come to "**pay him homage**" three times. They told Herod that's what they'd come to do. Herod told them that that's what he also wanted to do. And then, when they found him, "they knelt down and paid him homage" (Matt. 2:2b, 2:8c, 11a). Other Bible versions actually use the word "worship" here.

Jesus Christ was **more than a cute little baby boy**. He was the incarnation of God. The Bible tells us "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son" (Jn. 1:14). Later, when he became a full-grown man, it's notable Jesus Christ himself did not turn such worship away. When one of the apostles, named Thomas, fell at his feet and declared, "My Lord

and my God” Jesus acknowledged that Thomas believed because he had seen. He also went on to praise “those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (Jn. 20:28-29). Incense goes with worship.

3. Myrrh, the token of death.

If gold spoke of Christ’s **kingship**, and incense spoke of the **perfection** of his life, so myrrh spoke of his **suffering and death**. Myrrh, dried sap from **the Commiphora tree**, could be used as a sedative and it was used in embalming. When Christ was suffering on the cross, some offered him “**wine mixed with myrrh**,” apparently several times. Once, when he was offered it, “he did not take it” (Mk. 15:23). He wanted to bear all that suffering could bring to him. On another occasion of it being offered, he took it to relieve his suffering and pain (Jn. 19:30). Surely Jesus did not wish to run away from his pain or to deaden his suffering; we have plenty of evidence of that. He knew there could be something redemptive in suffering and pain. Yet Jesus was also like us, human; he knew there was a time to take away suffering and pain.

When Christ was finally taken down from the cross, **Joseph of Arimathea** and his friend, **Nicodemus**, used “**one hundred pounds**” of **myrrh and aloes** to prepare the body for burial (Jn. 19:38-42). Acts of devotion to a dead body have always been important. They were important in Jesus’ time; they are no less important today. They permit us to say goodbye; they permit us to grieve.

By any measure it would be odd, not to say offensive, to present an infant with spice used for sedation or embalming. But was it odd or offensive in this case? It was, as were the others, a gift of love and faith.

Certainly there were others who seemed to know something of the pain and suffering that Jesus Christ would endure. Soon after he was born, **Simeon** had told his mother Mary that “this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and will be sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed -- and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk. 2:34-35). And on several other occasions during his life a woman poured “ointment” over his feet to anoint him for his cause (Lk. 7:37; Jn. 11:2 & 12:3; Mk. 14:3; Matt. 26:7).

We don’t know what the wise men may have known and guessed about Jesus Christ’s ministry, but we do know that certain **Old Testament writers had foretold his suffering and death**. Psalm 22, for example, described some aspects of the Messiah’s pain. It was a verse from this psalm that Jesus quoted when he cried out

from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1; Mt. 27:46). And **Isaiah**, the prophet, had said of the Messiah, “He was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:3b, 4a, 5).

Christ was born to suffer and die for our sins. It was myrrh that symbolized this aspect of his ministry.

I have looked at the spiritual significance of each of the three gifts given to Jesus by the wise men: gold, frankincense and myrrh. **Gold** for the royalty of his reign! **Frankincense** for the worship he deserves! And **myrrh** for his redemptive suffering and death!

4. **An end to suffering and pain.**

Our study wouldn't be complete if we didn't take a moment to look at one other passage that bears upon the gifts of the wise men. It is found in **Isaiah 60:6** and occurs in the midst of a prophecy about the coming of Jesus Christ in glory at the end of the age. It is a passage that tells of the end of all suffering and pain. We read it at the beginning of this service.

The passage begins: “**Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you**” (60:1). In some ways that glory has already begun to shine in the first coming of Jesus. The passage goes on to say: “**Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn**” (60:3). Then comes verse six: “A multitude of camels ... shall come. **They shall bring gold and frankincense** and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” Certainly, the wise men represented some of the nations coming to Jesus and paying him homage, but it is true to say that all nations do not yet acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and King. That is yet to come in the future.

Certainly, the wise men brought their gifts of gold and frankincense, and their myrrh, too, for that matter, but it was not to be the end of gift-giving to Jesus Christ. **We too may bring our various gifts to him** throughout our lives.

And then, one day, when the end of all time shall come and Jesus Christ will return in glory, is it not possible that a scene will be enacted that is similar to the coming of

the wise men to Bethlehem? Jesus Christ will reign in power. Gifts will be given to him. **The tribute of the nations will be brought to him** (Ps. 72:10, 15; Isa. 60:6). But when the gifts are presented this time there will be only gold and frankincense. Myrrh spoke of pain and suffering and death. When the Lord Jesus Christ came the first time he came to suffer once-and-for-all for our sins. But, hereafter, there will be no more need for any more suffering. Jesus came to earth once-upon-a-time to suffer and die for our sins. Now those who believe on him will wait for his second coming in glory. And then all will be fulfilled.

As **John**, the beloved apostle, later declared in the 21st chapter of his book of the Revelation: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; [grief] and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away’” (Rev. 21:1a, 2-4).

The world has many false ideas about Christmas. For some it is only a story that is somehow meant to glorify motherhood and babies. For others there is the false idea that we must do something for God, like that “little drummer boy” in the song that gets played endlessly before every Christmas, which suggests that Jesus will smile on us if we play him a tune. Jesus does not need us to play him a tune. He doesn't need anything that we can produce. But we do need him. We need a Saviour.

That is why that great Advent hymn by **Charles Wesley** says so clearly, “Come, thou long-expected Jesus, / Born to set Thy people free; / From our fears and sins release us; / Let us find our rest in Thee. / Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art; / Dear desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.” “Born Thy people to deliver, / Born a child and yet a king, / Born in us to reign forever, / Now Thy gracious kingdom bring. / By Thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone; / By Thine all-sufficient merit / Raise us to Thy glorious throne.”

5. Our gifts.

I have said that we can bring nothing to Christ who alone is our Saviour; but, **we may come to him with love and faith**. Moreover, there is a sense in which, by

faith, we too may present our gifts of gold, incense and myrrh.

Begin with your “myrrh.” Myrrh is not only a symbol of Christ’s death, but also of the spiritual humility and death that should come to your sin and mine. Lay it at Christ’s feet, saying, “Lord Jesus, I know that I am less perfect than you are. I am a sinner. I know that I should receive the consequences of my sin which may bar me from your presence forever. But you took my sin, dying in my place. I believe that. Now I ask you to accept me as your child forever.” After you have done that, **come with your “incense,”** acknowledging the worship of Jesus Christ as your King. Give up your stranglehold on the throne of your life. Make him the Lord of every area of your life. **Finally, come with your “gold.”** Serve him. Share your goods with him and with his people and with others, especially the destitute and poor. And Jesus will bless you on a path of great spiritual blessing and joy. These are the gifts of faith and love. These are the only things that we can offer to the one who, by grace, has given us all things.

Amen

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Epiphany