

Reflection for Epiphany

The story of the Epiphany - The coming of the wise men or Magi to see the infant Jesus at Bethlehem is one of those biblical narratives that have become surrounded by a tremendous amount of legend.

Look at the scriptural narrative and there is no reason to suppose that there were three wise men, or that they were kings, or even that we know their names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. So, who were they? *Magi* were astrologers, who played a prominent part in court life in many eastern states at the time, as advisers to kings. Their insights were derived from sophisticated astronomical observation combined with the sort of 'interpretation' we would call horoscopes. By such observations and calculations, probably made in Mesopotamia, part of modern day Iraq, the Magi had concluded that an important royal birth had taken place in Palestine, which called for their visit.

The interesting thing to note is the story of these wise men only appears in Matthew's gospel a gospel written with a Jewish focus to its readership. Yet these visitors are not Jewish but Gentiles. It is they who Matthew recalled being the first visitors to the holy family after Jesus is born. In the minds of many, their coming is pictured on that first Christmas night, giving us that all too neat Christmas card nativity scene. This is not supported in the gospel narrative. Rather it is a combining of Luke and Matthew's gospels which in a way loses something of the importance and significance of each separate visit – the shepherds and the magi.

Look at Matthew's narrative and there is also a sharp contrast between these well-meaning foreign visitor and King Herod, ruler of Palestine at the time. Thus, it is a story that could draw our attention in several directions.

The openness of these men in being prepared to accept and understand what they saw, their determination and endurance in travelling towards that to which it pointed is something that reflects the words of Isaiah "*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*" Even the Gentile world is welcoming the young Jesus.

Then there is the more sinister side of the story, which we prefer to forget, as "Herod the Great" seeks to wipe out all possible opposition to his rule, the result, a massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem.

Then finally, there are the gifts given to the Christ child, and it is here that I want to focus our thoughts this morning. Commentators both ancient and modern have found much in these three gifts which they see as symbolic. Symbolic in that they tell us, prophetically, about this young child the wise men came to worship. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh – not the sort of gifts we would give to a young child.

Let's take each in turn.

Gold - that most precious of metals, for centuries sought after and treasured - but why? Why does humanity value it so highly? Why when all else in the economic world is in turmoil, gold is the final safe refuge. Look at the direction that gold prices are going at present while the economy is sliding backwards.

Gold has enduring qualities – never rusting or dissolving away.

The more you refine it, the more it purifies itself, becoming yet more valuable.

It also has great beauty – place it in the hands of skill craftsman and its beauty cannot be denied. Something we will see in May this year as King Charles is crowned and the crown jewels are on display in Westminster Abbey.

Gold - Beauty, durability and value tied together.

The gift of Gold given to the infant Christ an acknowledgement of his kingship. This child is a king! Leading to the question that so worries Herod "*Where is the baby born to be king of the Jews?*"

Yet this is not a king in the earthly sense, ruling a territorial area for a relatively short span of time. Rather a King whose kingdom will last forever and is universal in nature – the very presence of the Magi is a demonstration of that.

As we celebrate the Christmas season, it is all too easy to focus on the humanity of Jesus, the young child lying helpless in the cattle stall. We all relate to that in our own families when a new baby is born. What maybe we lose sight of is the kingship that is also Jesus'; the majesty that is his, the Glory that is his. This is our King; it is him we serve.

We all to readily pray "*your kingdom come*" but what is the reality of that kingdom, in our lives and our worship?

The Second gift is frankincense.

Look at a piece of frankincense and all you see is a hard, congealed sugar - like teardrop or irregular lump. It is in fact a resin obtained from a tree native in northern India and Arabia and like the first gift, is very expensive.

It was used in perfumes, medicines, and as incense in religious rites. In Exodus we read how it was one of the four ingredients used to make the incense that was burnt in the tabernacle, and it continued to be used in the first and second temple periods. Drop a couple of lumps onto hot charcoal and quickly you will both smell its fragrance and see the smoke rising – like a prayer rising to heaven.

If gold signified Jesus kingship of frankincense reminds us of his priesthood. As the writer to the Hebrews put it "*Let us, ... hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we have a great High Priest who has gone into the very presence of God—Jesus, the Son of God.*" The priest is the person who went between the people and God, the one who on behalf of the whole congregation offered sacrifice to God. In the Temple, the High Priest was the only one allowed into the Holy of Holies and then just once a year - acting on behalf of the people.

If Christ is our High Priest who has gone into the very presence of God, then we, the church, are his priesthood here on earth - the priesthood of all believers. Called to bring God and humanity closer together, following the example of our High Priest, in word, action and prayer.

How many of us see our prayer in that light - a time to hold before God, regularly not just families and ourselves, but the world around us - those who each day touch our lives for good or for ill? If we are truly following our Lord then this should become part of our priestly service and duty.

The final gift, Myrrh - again, the resin from a small tree found in Arabia - but this time used to create perfumes. Perfumes that were used for a number of applications including the anointing of kings, and impregnating the linen bands used to rap a body ready for burial. It here that many, have seen the symbolism of this gift -a foretelling of so much of what follows in our Lord's life and culminating in his passion.

For the Christ child the road would not be simple or easy, rather he would be the suffering servant, rejected, and ultimately crucified as a common criminal. Yet through that suffering would come healing and salvation for all. It is only through suffering that he ultimately takes his place in glory.

Here lies for us one of the great mystery of the incarnation. That out of weakness and subjection, out of the worst that could be thrown at him comes life eternal.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

As we reflect once again on the coming of the magi those gentile strangers, as we come to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion; let us thank God afresh for his love to us, his sacrifice for us. And let us pray for a willingness to have lives that show his love and grace to all - regardless of who they are.

The presence of the Magi - reminding us that Christ came for all.