



St Andrew's
Eaton, Norwich

'a church for all - a place for you'

SUNDAY 2 JANUARY 2022

SERMON AND PRAYERS

EPIPHANY SUNDAY

TODAY'S SERMON: 'THE RIGHT GIFT'

Matthew 2.1-12

(See also Ephesians 3.1-12)

Speaker: Phil Rodd

Introduction

Well, it's good to be back in church again, with a new year ahead of us, isn't it? And I do hope you had a truly blessed Christmas, whether it was noisy or peaceful. The year ahead does call us forward, though, doesn't it? And again, as we look forward, we do so with these familiar readings - parts of the gospel narratives that for most people are just all part and parcel of 'Christmas'. And yet after all the angelic visitations, and the miracle birth of Christ's Nativity, what we have today is a very human story - one that is no longer confined to the people of Bethlehem. This story lifts our eyes to broader horizons, just like the evening news, with stories from people far and wide.

Much has been said about the wise men and the gifts they bring: gold, frankincense, myrrh. Gold for a king, for Christ is the King, the appointed one, the anointed one; frankincense for a priest; myrrh for death, for a dying saviour... But in some ways, I think this can all sound a bit too neat - all the boxes ticked. Surely the giving of the Wise Men must communicate more than just some neat theological points, as neat and as pretty as a picture on yet another Christmas card.

So rather than looking at what the gifts might mean in themselves, I want to focus on what the gifts might mean for us - and how they might 'translate', as it were, for us, in the very strange world, the very needy world, that we inhabit at the very beginning of this new year 2022.

a. Firstly then, the gold

Gold, as we've seen already, for a king - indeed, for *the* King, the King of kings and Lord of Lords. And perhaps in our minds' eyes, we picture the gold of treasure troves, of crown jewels. And there is obviously something very royal about gold - something superlative, something splendid. And as we read Matthew's account of the Wise Men coming to visit the child Jesus, bringing their gifts, we're clearly intended to hear an echo of Isaiah's prophecy, of foreign rulers travelling from afar, bringing great wealth as homage - just as the Queen of Sheba had done in the days of the great King Solomon. So Isaiah says: 'Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because ... the wealth of the nations shall come to you... They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord' (Isaiah 60.3-6).

What happens with the Magi and their gifts is both like Isaiah's prophecy, and different from it. The gold is splendid, and it's valuable. But have you ever stopped to wonder what happened to that gold? Certainly it didn't get put aside in a treasure chest of great value. No, because it was needed. The very next part of the story is that Herod did what Herod was most famous for: slaughtering his enemies - in this case, slaughtering every male child that could possibly be this new king that the Magi have told him about - one destined, so it would seem, to supplant him.

And there's another dream, you remember, and Joseph is warned not to hang around, but to flee for his life - or rather, for Jesus's life. And off they go to Egypt, leaving behind any last vestiges of comfort and familiarity that they might have built up in Bethlehem since Jesus had been born. Bethlehem was, after all, Joseph's family's home town - so he'd probably been able to support Mary and the growing baby there by doing a bit of carpentry. But in Egypt, well, they wouldn't even have been able to speak the language.

So, I reckon the gold gets cashed in - it gets used, because it's needed. And dare we think what might have happened if Joseph hadn't had the wherewithal to get Mary and Jesus out of the clutches of Herod? Probably the Magi in giving their gold thought that they were paying homage to one born to be king. But in fact God used this gift very practically.

What does this say of our giving, I wonder? Do we take it seriously? Do we give generously? Or do we just leave it to others? I've been told that some of you have increased your giving since I mentioned this last, during Advent, when our morning service readings took us to the prophet Malachi - and the vital teaching given there about the 'tithe' - the 10% of all income that 'belongs' to God - it simply isn't ours to withhold, in other words. Thank you to those who have responded to what I said about this before.

But at the beginning of this new year, I do need to ask again: Will we give in in worship and in obedience - will our giving be 'as gold' - generous, mirroring the generosity of God to us? Will we play our part, or will we shrug our shoulders and go about our own business?

b. Secondly, the frankincense

Another costly gift - but this is solely to do with worship - incense used in those days by a priest in a temple, or by a priest in *the* temple at Jerusalem - bringing people closer to God in a place specially designated for public worship.

It's a gift, then, that speaks not just of Christ's priestly role, bridging the gap between heaven and earth, the gap between the divine and the human - eventually, of course, by becoming the perfect once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world. It goes a bit further than that, because our worship is to be like that frankincense, helping to close the gap for those who haven't considered the claims that the Creating, Saving God rightly has on their lives - closing that gap by bringing those we know to him, in our prayers, in lives lived kindly towards them, and also playing our part to speak to them of his love for them.

That's frankincense - not just a nice smell in a cathedral for those who like that sort of thing - but precious friends, neighbours, colleagues, family members brought near to the God who has come near to us in Jesus.

c. Thirdly, the myrrh

Slightly trickier, because myrrh isn't something that many of us encounter in our daily lives - or possibly ever in our whole lives. It's another substance that can be burned, like incense; but here it seems to be given as some kind of presentiment of Christ's death - as myrrh was often used in embalming. It's a gift, then, that points forward to Christ's suffering and death - and to his total commitment to give himself up to death itself, for us all.

What does that mean for us? Well, fortunately that's a level of commitment that we will never be called on to make. Yes, we may be called on to face criticism, persecution even (of some kind) - and of course in some parts of the world that persecution can be extreme. But no one will have to face the total abandonment that Christ himself bore for us on the cross, with the crushing weight of all our sins, racking his body and soul such that he cried out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

And yet, and yet, Jesus challenges us all, to lay down our lives. Matthew chapter 16: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

For myrrh speaks of the cross; and the cross speaks of commitment, total and utter commitment - the ordering of our lives that will turn us aside from the priority of our own comfort and wellbeing, but will turn us out towards one another, and to those in the world around us - giving generously of ourselves, giving wholeheartedly, giving with commitment.

Conclusion

It's time to end - and again I say, at the beginning of a new year this is a good time for us all, I think, to think over again about our worship of King Jesus. Not to get all defensive or self-critical about things - that's not what God wants. But to think again about what we could do to be more

exuberant in our worship of God, in our service to God, such that our lives might themselves be 'The Right Gift', reflecting the right gifts of the Magi: gold, for we are to give generously; frankincense, for everything about us is to draw others closer to God; and myrrh, for our lives are to be given in total love and commitment.

As St Paul puts it so perfectly: 'Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him' (Philippians 3.7-9a).

PRAYERS

1. Our Father, Creator of the universe, Desire of the nations, by the leading of a star, you revealed yourself to the peoples of the earth, through your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. We thank you Father, for the Gift to humankind of your Son.

We thank you for the ultimate privilege worth having; that we have been adopted as your children; sons and daughters of the Most High God. We have become heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:6; Romans 8:17), through whom, we have access to you.

So Father, we come as your children, with boldness to Your Throne of Grace, in the confidence and authority of the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

We desire to be doers of your Word; the incorruptible Word of God. We remind ourselves that Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:14) and the Word of Life (1 John 1:1). Strengthen us by your Spirit, to have ears that hear and eyes that see (Matt. 13:15). Soften our hearts, always ready to obey you, so that, as your hands and feet in the earth, we may live out the truth of the Gospel, in all we do.

Help us to Hear Your Word
Let Your Kingdom Come.

2. We thank you Father for the gift of another year. As we make our plans and resolutions for the year ahead, please grant us the awareness of your presence with us and the wisdom and humility to seek you first and put you first, in all we do. As the year unfolds, we ask that you may grant us your peace and a revelation of your purposes for our lives, for both young and old.

In your unending grace, we ask that you guide and sustain us daily, to be faithful to the things you have called us to; whether at home, at work, at school and together, as your church.

Help us to Hear Your Word
Let Your Kingdom Come.

3. We Pray for the World

As we celebrate Epiphany, we are conscious that millions around the world, lack adequate access to the basic needs of life - food, clean water, sanitation, health care, amongst other things. Many are forced to flee their home lands, making dangerous journeys across continents, with children. The reasons are often complex, yet we know that the overarching theme is that of tyranny, injustice, oppression and exploitation.

Father, we pray for righteous leadership in the nations of the world and ask that the peace of the Prince of Peace will override and overrule the tyranny, injustice, oppression and exploitation. In your righteousness and justice, we appeal to you to raise a new breed of righteous leadership that will champion the cause of the poor and needy; globally, in our own nation and in our local communities.

We pray for all who provide humanitarian assistance; that you would grant them and their partners all the necessary human and material resources, with fortitude as they respond to urgent and dire needs in different parts of the world.

We pray for an ease of the tensions in the borders of the Ukraine and in the Middle East. We pray for the Peace of Jerusalem.

Help us to Hear Your Word
Let Your Kingdom Come.

4. We Pray for our Nation

Father, we do not take your blessings for granted. We thank you and ask for your continued protection, peace, prosperity and stability upon this land and all its people.

We pray for all in positions of power and influence in every domain of national life; that their decisions and actions will be guided by Godly wisdom, so that we may all live peaceable lives. We pray for Her Majesty, the Queen that you would strengthen and keep her in her faithful service to our nation and the Commonwealth, as she approaches the milestone of her Platinum Jubilee. We pray your goodness and tender mercies for all members of her family.

We pray for our Prime Minister, members of his Cabinet and the Leader of the Opposition and all Members of both Houses of Parliament; that you will protect them and that they will serve this nation and all her people with integrity, righteousness and justice.

Help us to Hear Your Word
Let Your Kingdom Come.

5. We Pray for our Church Family and Community

We pray for our Parish and all who live and work within it. We pray that your goodness will abound in our neighbourhoods. We ask that the Light of Christ will shine forth, with the love of God and the fragrance of Christ, in every place.

We pray for our clergy, Wardens, PCC, Parish Office and all who serve with them. We lift up to you our Vicar Phil and Cathy; our Curate James and Stephanie; our Associate Minister Sheila and all of our retired clergy who support them; Ivan and Romaine; Douglas and Ismene; Robin and Jane. Lucy Stone, our Children and Family Worker; Patrick and Catherine, at our sister church, Christ Church and all who work with them there.

We thank you Father for each one of them and their tireless service over the past year. We ask that you would restore, revitalise, replenish and strengthen each one of them in the year ahead. In a moment of silence, let us bring to our Heavenly Father all those in need of our prayers...

Help us to Hear Your Word
Let Your Kingdom Come.

Collect for Epiphany Sunday

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.



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