



A sermon preached at  
St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

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Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The season of gift-giving is over! And we can all breathe a sigh of relief!

In our culture, the way we give and receive gifts is a funny old business, isn't it! In his satirical essay entitled "Xmas and Christmas", C. S. Lewis observes what goes on as follows:

At this time, people choose to send gifts to one another. And yet, rather than joy, the whole exercise seems to become one of great labour and weariness. For every citizen has to guess the value of the gift that will be sent to him, so that he may send one of equal value, whether he can afford it or not. And they buy as gifts for one another such things as no man ever bought for himself. And the sellers, understanding the custom, put forth all kinds of trumpery, and whatever, being useless and ridiculous, they have been unable to sell throughout the year they now sell as a gift of the highest value.

I hope you managed to navigate the culture niceties of gift-giving during Christmas!

But now, we find ourselves in Epiphany. And with a Gospel reading that also speaks of gift-giving. “On entering the house, the magi 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).

I was in a Bible study once looking at this passage. And upon reading that verse, the person sitting next to me, who happened to be a mother of young children, looked confused. And when I asked why, she said: “well, what kind of gifts were these? I know if I had a new child in the house, I’d have been looking for something more practical: nappies, blankets, or microwave meals, for example!”

And it’s true, isn’t it. These are strange gifts.

But, if we look at them symbolically, we can see that they each represent something about how this child is and why he came.

### **First, the gold.**

In the Bible, gold is always associated with kingship and rule. Joseph was given a gold chain by Pharaoh when he was made ruler of Egypt (Genesis 41:42). The Queen of Sheba brought gold to Solomon (1 Kings 10:2). And in Psalm 72:15, we’re told that one day a king will be born who is so great that all the nations of the world will bow before him with their gifts of gold.

Christians believe that this child, born to Mary and laid in a manger, *is* that king. Matthew makes that point many times in the passage we read. In v.6, he cites the OT prophecy that from Bethlehem shall come forth a “ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel”. In v.2, the magi ask: “where is this child who has been born king of the Jews?”. And in v.11, when they find him, we read that these magi “knelt down and worshipped him”.

What about you? Is Jesus Christ “king” of your life? Have you truly bent the knee to him?

These days, it takes courage to do that. After all, we live in a secular, pluralist society. Many, or even most people out there will not accept that Jesus has a claim on their lives. Of course not! It was ever thus. Look at the example of Herod, who reacts with fear and dismay at the idea that this king may have arrived and sets out his schemes to destroy him. And then, in

what is probably the saddest verse in all of Scripture, just after the end of our passage, we read of his slaughter of “all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under” (Matt 2:16).

It is not easy to accept Jesus Christ as king. And yet, Matthew’s Gospel is continually reminding us that the coming of Jesus is an event that confronts us with a decision: who do you think this baby is? Will you worship as king, or do you want him out of your life?

### **Second, the frankincense.**

Frankincense, the Greek is *libanos*, was a gum resin from trees that was used for worship in the Temple; just as we use it here, it was a symbol of prayer and relationship with God. So in Exodus 30, God orders Moses to erect an altar of incense which Aaron and his fellow priests are to keep burning, a place where God has promised “I will meet my people”.

This baby was given incense to symbolise the fact that God will meet his people *through him*, for he is the ultimate priest, who would reconcile man and God.

Fifteen hundred years ago Augustine told us there is something missing if we don’t know that relationship, “O God, you have made us for yourselves, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”.

Our culture is full of a terrifying restlessness, despite having achieved so much.

Bob Geldof’s autobiography is entitled: “is that it?” In it, there is a citation from an interview he conducted with the *The Times* reporter Mick Brown, just after having raised over £50 million for *Live Aid*:

Ask Geldof if his life is fulfilled and he snorts with laughter: “not at all, I don’t even know what that would mean. I’m unfulfilled as a human being. After all, why is there are such large holes down here [*he thumps his chest*]. Everything I’ve done is because I’m frightened of what’s down there in those holes. So I stay active, frenetically so. And that freneticism helps me put aside the big questions that I know I must face: who am I and what was I put on earth to do?”

However you try to fill those holes (hard work, sport, music, friends, money, success), good things though these are, they will leave you with an emptiness deep down, a cosmic loneliness, which is there because we are not in relationship with the God who made us. And only this baby can bring you back into relationship with Him. He is the true priest (Hebrews).

### **Lastly, there is the myrrh.**

Myrrh was an element used in perfumes for anointing and for burial. So in John 19:39, we read that Nicodemus brought a mixture of “myrrh and aloes with which to prepare Jesus’ body for burial”.

From very early on in the Church's history, then, this gift was understood as prefiguring death. Here in Matthew's Gospel, then, we're told right at the beginning that this baby was *born to die*. And by dying, he would save his people from their sins.

This is central to the Christian faith. We will never understand why we should bow down and worship Christ, as the "magi" do, if we don't understand that this child was born in order to die. For it is by his death on the cross, some thirty years or so later, that Jesus will pay the penalty for our sin and make a way for us to come back to God, justified, forgiven, free. That is the good news of Christianity. That is what makes our hearts sing for joy. It's why we bow our knee and worship Christ. And it's what prompts us, with every ounce of energy we have, to go out into the world and to invite people to come to Him as their Saviour too.

Christianity is not good advice about morals. It's *a message of good news about what God has done*, at no small cost to Himself. And it's an invitation to put your faith in that event as making a difference to you.

As the Apostle Paul says: "Jesus Christ, being in very nature God, was made in human likeness [...] But, being found in appearance as a man, he then humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! And so God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:6-11).

So what will you do with these three gifts? Will you pack them away, like the tinsel and baubles? Or will you receive Jesus Christ as king, as priest, and as Saviour this season of Epiphany and in the year ahead? **Amen.**

**Sermon preached on Sunday 5 January 2020, Epiphany Sunday**