

OT: Isaiah 60.1-6
NT: Ephesians 3.1-12
Gp: Matthew 2.1-12

So, Christmas is over for another year, the last mince pies have been eaten, the dregs of Baileys squeezed out of the bottle, Christmas lights taken down, decorations put away and the Christmas trees tossed into piles for recycling or just abandoned on the roadside. New Year's resolutions made, Christmas has come and gone and also the New Year, and if we are honest, we would probably have to admit that most of us, if not all of us, have been feeling rather exhausted!

We do it every year – the mad rush to buy all the presents before the shops close on Christmas Eve, remembering to order the turkey in time and if we are really organised to make the Christmas cake well in advance. The late-night partying – fireworks to welcome in the New Year. An endless orgy of eating and drinking – and so the frenzy goes on until we reach today – as we celebrate the great feast of Epiphany.

For a moment we pause – tomorrow the world goes back to work, if they haven't already done so in the last few days – the schools re-open – it's back to the daily routine. But today, as we celebrate Epiphany, we are able to pause for a moment.

The feast of Epiphany, when we focus on the manifestation of the incarnate God in the Christ Child through the visitation of the Magi. Epiphany, is seen by most people sadly now as the marker to go back to normal after Christmas. It is, however for Christians, an opportunity for us to reflect on the journey of the Magi, to consider again our own response to the birth of Christ, will we come to worship at the manger and lay our own gifts before him or will we just put him away with the decorations to be brought out again next year.

Epiphany is a very ancient feast, and its celebration is even older in the life of the Church than Christmas! If the true meaning of Christmas is of God's gift to us of the Son Jesus Christ born in a manger at Bethlehem, if the meaning of Christmas is about what God gives us – then Epiphany is about what we give God. It's about our response to the gift of Jesus.

Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers who gives us this wonderfully colourful story of the Wise Men from the East bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to present to Jesus. These Wise Men are indeed exotic and mysterious figures. Traditionally "Magi" means "Wise Men", but I have heard them described as astrologers whose gifts were what they had used for their magic arts that they now gave up and laid at Jesus' feet. A rather curious interpretation.

In any nativity play you go to there will be three of them. But it doesn't actually say there were three in the text, simply that they bore three gifts. If we remember anything about this story then it is likely to be that the Magi gave three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Let's look at these three gifts for a moment, for they are rich in layers of meaning.

The well-known Epiphany hymn speaks of “gold of obedience”, suggesting the obedience we owe to Christ as our true king. The Wise Men may themselves have been kings, ruling a kingdom – we do not know. But however powerful they may have been, in their sumptuous gifts they acknowledged that Jesus deserved their allegiance, just as a subject owes allegiance to a king. On a more literal level the gold could simply indicate wealth; they were giving up their wealth, their livelihood, to Jesus in a symbolic gesture.

Certainly, the Wise Man who gave Jesus gold was literally giving up some of his treasure. But I am sure there are in fact countless ways in which we can give to God, on all kinds of levels of meaning. Money – material wealth – is just one way at Epiphany perhaps it is good to ponder on how much of our material wealth, money, property, possessions, do we use for God, do we willingly give to God?

The Wise Men's gifts get more curious, frankincense. Since at least Old Testament times incense has been a powerful symbol of worship, of prayer. As it says in Psalm 141:

“O Lord, I call to you; come quickly to me.
Hear my voice when I call to you.
May my prayer be set before you like incense;
May the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.”

Elsewhere in the Bible, in the Book of Revelation, the wafting of incense is likened to the prayers of the saints rising to God. Incense with its sweet smell and air of mystery is evocative of our worship, our devotion. But, as the Epiphany hymn also suggests, it is “costly devotion”. Following Christ is costly.

And so, we come to the most mysterious of the Wise Men's three gifts, myrrh. In ancient times myrrh was a resin used for embalming the dead. The third gift gives a bitter-sweet tone to this enchanting story of Wise Men who follow a star to find Jesus.

Jesus is not long born – and one of the first presents he receives is a gift to be used at his burial. There is a stark reality to this third gift. The crib points to the cross; the joy of Jesus' birth points to the shadow of his death on the cross. And of course, that death was for all. All are included in the embrace of Christ's love. And this story of the Wise Men is the first story in the gospels to indicate this truth. Those Wise Men travelled a long, long way. The journey was long and hard for them. The 20th century poet T.S. Eliot captured this hauntingly in the opening lines of his poem entitled, “Journey of the Magi”:

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”

The Wise Men came from a long and far-away land, an unspecified place in the East, far away from the Jewish traditions of God’s chosen people in the Promised Land. And yet – and this is the marvellous truth of this popular story – and yet they recognised Jesus. Their devotion tells us in story form the truth that Paul is so often at pains to tell us in his letters – that Christ’s death and resurrection has opened up a way to God not just for Jews but also for Gentiles – not just for the faithful believers, but also for the wayward and far-off.

“Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what the plan of the mystery is hidden for ages in God who created all things” Ephesians 3 verse 8-9

The word “Epiphany” literally means “showing” or “revealing”. In this story Jesus is shown, or revealed, to the Gentiles, to people who have never heard of him. In our own increasingly secular society today even here in England there are people around us who have never really heard of Jesus and the loving ways of God revealed through him. This feast of Epiphany gives those of us who are privileged to know and love God a multi-faceted challenge: do we give sufficiently of ourselves to God? Is our giving of ourselves – in response to our lavish God-costly? And are we open to those around us – perhaps those who live in our own street – who still may have quite a long way to travel in their search for Love and Truth? Are we open enough to help them as they too travel on their own journey when the ways are “deep” and the weather “sharp”?

And, in our own spiritual travelling, do we lay our own hearts bare to the truths God may be seeking to reveal to us each day?

Christmas may be over for another year and the world may be returning to whatever normal is but as we enter the delights and privileges of this Epiphany season let us reflect and ponder ever more deeply on the mystery of the Incarnation – of God born as one of us – and endeavour to be open to God’s gifts revealed to us in Jesus, and to share those gifts with our fellow travellers on the way.

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