

"Epiphany Gifts"

Matthew 2:11

January 4, 2015

The Epiphany of Our Lord

Although our custom of giving gifts to one another is most closely associated with Christmas, the first time we actually see gifts given to celebrate the birth of Christ comes on Epiphany when Magi from the east presented their gifts to the Christ Child. The Word of God says, "And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."

It is interesting to note that the gift giving, unlike so often today, was not based on greed, commercialism, or materialism. Rather, it flowed from the Magi's worship of the original Christmas gift – Christ, the gift of God for the world. Much discussion has been had about these three gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Many want to spiritualize these gifts or claim that the Magi knowingly gave certain gifts which had special meanings. I doubt that. I think they chose the most valuable treasures they had to present to the King for whom they had traveled many miles to see. Nevertheless, the nature of these valuable gifts can proclaim the nature of God's gift to us in Jesus Christ and what He came to do and bring.

The first gift is gold. Since the Magi had said they were searching for "he who has been born king of the Jews", this would be a very appropriate gift for them to present to Jesus. Gold was a precious metal and as such was a very valuable commodity. It has always been symbolic of wealth and of royalty. The essential symbol identifying a king was a golden crown on his head. Gold was truly a gift for a king.

The second gift is frankincense. Frankincense was an aromatic resin (or sap) from certain trees in the Mideast that was allowed to dry and harden. It was also a very valuable gift because of its rarity and its use. One of its chief uses (as its name indicates) was in religious worship. It is highly fragrant when burned and was therefore used in worship, both in the Old Testament tabernacle and

the New Testament temple where it was burned as a pleasant offering to God. Frankincense was truly a gift for God.

The third gift is myrrh. Myrrh was also an aromatic resin (or sap) taken from trees in Arabia much in the same way frankincense was obtained. Myrrh was also considered to be a very valuable gift because of its exotic nature and the great distance it had to be brought. Myrrh had the sweet smelling quality of a perfume. It was used to anoint furnishings in the Old Testament tabernacle to help cover up the slaughterhouse smell of all the animal sacrifices. As a sweet smelling perfume it also was used by Jews to anoint dead bodies and cover their odor until they could be buried. Of the three gifts given, this one seems to me to be the oddest one to present to a newborn peasant baby. Myrrh was an appropriate gift for a person who was about to die.

God can use anything, even gifts presented by pagan astrologers, to reveal His Son to the world. When you understand the nature of these epiphany gifts, it's not too hard to understand what they can tell us about Jesus.

Gold is a gift for a king. Jesus is a king. It's hard to say just exactly what kind of king the Magi were hoping to find. By going to Herod's palace, it seems clear that they were expecting a political earthly king. Jesus was not that but so much more. He came, not to establish and maintain a temporal kingdom here on earth. Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God which would last forever.

Frankincense is a gift for God. Jesus is God. Although they fell down to worship Jesus, it's not entirely clear how much the Magi understood about all of this. But it's very clear that this Baby whose birth was foretold by prophets, announced by angels, and witnessed by shepherds is more than just a special Child. He is Almighty God incarnate in the weakness of human flesh. He is holy God surrounded by sinners. As God, in inaugurating the kingdom, Jesus would judge, condemn, and get rid of all sin and evil.

Myrrh is a gift for someone who is going to die. Jesus came to die. Even though they presented the gift of myrrh, I'm sure the Magi had no idea what that gift was foreshadowing. Mary was barely able to comprehend and accept the words she heard from Simeon about the opposition her Son would face when He grew up and the sword of great sadness that would pierce her heart at His death. Yet this is precisely why this cute little Baby was born. It was not for Him to be placed on a manger, but to be placed on a cross with the sin of the world on His back and to die under the wrath and justice of God so that humans who were actually guilty of the sins He was carrying could be forgiven, free, and forever live in the kingdom of God. One of the poignant ironies of the Gospels is that Matthew, the first Gospel, begins by showing the Baby Jesus being presented with myrrh to celebrate His birth and John, the last Gospel, ends with Nicodemus "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight" (John 19:39) to anoint the body of the adult Jesus for burial at His death.

The Gift of the Magi (besides being the theme of this sermon) is also a short story by O. Henry. It tells of a young married couple who are very much in love, but also very poor. His one prized possession is his shiny gold pocket watch. Her one prized possession is her long hair flowing almost down to her knees. Since they are poor, they have no money to buy Christmas gifts for one another. But she secretly sells her hair to a hairdresser and buys him a fob for his watch. Excited to give him her gift, she is perplexed when she sees his face fall when he arrives home. For, you see, he had just sold his watch to buy expensive combs for her hair. Although their gifts only made their love for each other stronger, they conflicted with each other. He couldn't use the fob because of the gift he gave to her. She couldn't use the combs because of the gift she gave to him.

The gifts of the original Magi to Jesus do not conflict with the gifts Jesus came to bring to us. Rather, they help us to understand and appreciate the gifts Jesus brought for us. He is our Savior who came to die for us to take away our guilt, our condemnation, and punishment. He has given to

you and I full forgiveness for every sin of thought, word, and deed. He has given you and me a new life at baptism – a life which the problems of this world, even death itself, cannot destroy.

Jesus is our God come in human flesh for us. As man, He truly understands and empathizes with our human experience because He lived it. As God, He is truly able to be present with us in divine worship. He has promised, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:20) This is more than some spiritual presence. He is actually here among us now. He even gives us His true body to eat and His true blood to drink for the forgiveness of our sins and, in uniting us to Himself, also unites us with one another. When our prayers are set before Him as incense (Psalm 141:2), we can be sure He is pleased to hear us and will answer us according to whatever is best for us in His good and gracious will.

The Jesus who was born, lived, and died, has also been raised from the dead. Therefore, He will come as king again to judge all people and restore creation. For us, that brings no fear, only hope and anticipation. This Baby was born...this Man died....this Sacrifice was made, as Luther put it, “that [each of us] may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.”

One of my favorite Christmas carols not to make it into the hymnal is “We Three Kings”. Other than the fact that Bible never calls the Magi “kings” nor gives a number, the song gets many things right. The last verse sums up everything the gifts tell us about the Baby Jesus and our response to Him:

Glorious now behold Him arise,
King and God and Sacrifice.
Alleluia, alleluia!
Earth to the heavens replies

And that remains our song throughout the season of Epiphany: praise be to our King, our God, and our Sacrifice. Amen.

