

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
MATTHEW 2:1-12

The Gifts of the Magi – and Our Gifts

The wise men who came to Bethlehem to see the young Jesus have fascinated Christians for centuries. The aura of magic and mystery hangs over this story, related in this morning's Gospel, more than Luke's account of the local shepherds coming to Jesus' crib on the night of or after his birth, although that account does feature angels.

The very aura of magic and mystery has caused more skeptical people to discount this story. What wise men? From where? And what star?

Actually, though, it is in fact easier to find back-up information for Matthew's account of the visit to Jesus by the wise men and what happened before and afterwards than it is for some of the details of Luke's account. But first, let's look at the story as it stands in scripture. Feel free to refer to your service leaflet for Matthew 2:1-12 while I preach, because this is a story about which people may think they know more than is, in fact, there.

First of all, I love the hymn "We Three Kings" too, but there is no description of the wise men in the Bible as Kings. Don't worry, we'll sing the hymn anyway. They were *magi*, translated "wise men" – astrologers and astronomers – there was no distinction between the two in ancient times.

Second, the Bible doesn't say how many there were of them. We deduce that there were three wise men only because there are three gifts mentioned. Logical, but not definitive.

Third, Jesus was not necessarily a newborn when they came. Just after this story, Matthew describes vicious King Herod's attempt to murder Jesus; Herod orders that all boys in Bethlehem "who were two years old and under" shall be slaughtered by his soldiers. So Jesus was likely a toddler by this time; we celebrate the visit of the wise men twelve days after Christmas for liturgical reasons, not necessarily because they actually appeared twelve days after Jesus' birthday. Matthew's chronology also fits with Matthew's assumption that Joseph and Mary *lived* in Bethlehem and only left it and later relocated to Nazareth because of Herod's persecution.

Oh, yes, and according to all records, King Herod died in what we call 4 B.C., so Jesus therefore was born somewhere around 4-6 B.C. even if the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem was one of Herod's last wicked deeds. Our calendar, you see, is off; when the date of Jesus' birth was guessed at in the Middle Ages, the guesses were several years off. It is, in fact, later than you think – you were afraid of that, right? Counting from Jesus' birth, this might be the year 2013.

Actually those facts help to *reinforce* Matthew's story, as we shall see.

So now to the "wise men from the East." Sounds vague and mysterious. Well, the fact is that ancient Jews were *not* expert stargazers because star gazing was associated with astrology, a constellation (so to speak) of pagan beliefs surrounding the supposed influence of stars, planets, comets and so forth on human lives. A lot of people still believe in this stuff, which is why so many newspapers carry horoscopes, but the Bible clearly and repeatedly says astrology is bogus.

In "the East," however, astronomy/astrology was practiced, especially in what we now call *Iraq* and *Iran*, which had the best astronomers west of China. Both countries are east of the Holy Land, and both make excellent candidates for *the homeland of the first non-Jews to worship Jesus* – which is the point of the story, after all. You never know where your friends will come from.

Incidentally, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is the oldest Christian church in the world. It survived when other churches in the Holy Land were destroyed by invading Persians (Iranians) in the 7th Century – these were pagan, *pre-Islamic* Persians – for one simple reason. There was a mosaic on the wall of the church of the three wise men – *dressed in Persian clothes*. The marauding soldiers burst in, saw the mosaic, said "These guys look like us," and left the church alone. You never know where your friends will come from. Best not to make too many broad assumptions, I think.

Okay, but what about the "Star of Wonder"? Well, first of all, in ancient times, every celestial body was called a "star," so we need to think broadly about this. Secondly, we need to look in astronomical records for a celestial phenomenon which would have launched expert star-gazers on a trip of hundreds of miles – but would have been unnoticed by those ignorant of the stars who lived in Jerusalem – *just six miles from Bethlehem*. I think, therefore, we can eliminate something spectacular, like a supernova.

What about a triple conjunction – an apparent drawing close together on three different occasions in one calendar year – of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, followed by Mars appearing to be close together to those planets in the night sky early the next year? And suppose the "great conjunction" of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the zodiacal constellation of Pisces, which was sometimes associated with the Hebrew people and with the End Times? And suppose Jupiter, "the King of the planets," was associated with one who would be King if the world and Saturn was associated with the people of Syria – Palestine? Hmm. And suppose all of this happened in 7-6 B.C., just about the time Jesus was probably born?

So we have wise men from "the East" who were led by a "star" which they noticed but which Herod didn't.

But what I'd *really* like to focus on is the three *gifts* of the wise men: "gold, frankincense and myrrh." The gifts of the wise men were the first "Christmas presents," the origin of gift-giving at this season, and the reason that *today* is the day for gift-giving in Hispanic tradition, which makes a lot of sense to me. But let's note that the gifts of the magi were given *to Jesus*, not to each other – the wise men could have stayed home and done that.

For centuries, the gifts have been interpreted symbolically, as they are in the hymn “We Three Kings.” Gold was given to Jesus because he was (and is) a King – King of Kings, in fact, frankincense (burned in worship in some churches) because he is God, and myrrh because he was a mortal man doomed to die and his body would be anointed with aromatic ointments like myrrh. All these were gifts the magi thought about and brought with them; they didn’t pick them up en route in a mall outside of Jerusalem as an afterthought.

Okay, how about the gifts of the magi and *our gifts*? If their generosity to Jesus is supposed to inspire our generosity to Jesus, how should we respond? Now, we do celebrate the fact that many of us are already doing some of the following suggestions, and some of us are doing many of them already, but for the benefit of all, let’s consider them all.

Let’s count down the gifts, David Letterman-style, and start with number three: myrrh, the gift which acknowledges Jesus’ *mortality*. Jesus does not need myrrh anymore; he is risen from the dead, never to die again. *We, however, are mortal* – and if our gifts to Jesus are to be from us and from our hearts, perhaps we should offer gifts “to Jesus” which acknowledge *our own* mortality.

Like, for instance, writing our wills. Over half of Americans do not have wills. If that’s the case with you, it means the State of New Jersey has written one for you – and guess who therefore is in charge of all of your assets – and, if you have minor children, of your children?

So *writing a will* would be a good New Year’s resolution, for the sake of your family – it’s a mess when someone dies without a will – and because it offers you an opportunity to be generous to charities instead of to the State of New Jersey. The Book of Common Prayer encourages Christians to “leave bequests, when they are able, for religious and charitable purposes.” You could also consider becoming an organ donor if you aren’t already, or filling out the “Five Wishes” booklet for your wishes about your ultimate care. Information about all these things is on the table in the Welcoming Area. Any of these can be done as one of your three gifts to bring to Jesus.

The second gift of the magi was frankincense. This was (and still is, in some churches) burned as part of worship, so frankincense symbolically is a gift which acknowledges God to be God by our worship of God – instead of worshipping ourselves, a regular temptation especially if we do not make a regular habit of worshipping God.

So, here’s another potential New Year’s resolution: more frequent worship of God as part of the community of faith, in church, and daily worship of God in personal, private prayer.

The first gift of the magi mentioned is the gift of gold. This, more than anything else, is valued in America: it is the “sacrament” of American materialism. If we keep all our gold for ourselves, we are pretending that we ourselves are the source and owner of whatever money we may have. The reality is that our very lives are gifts from God, the creation itself was made and is still owned by God, and anything we might give God as a thank-offering is already God’s. Hence the words of King David which we sometimes

say at the offering: “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.”

So if we want to join the wise men in being systematically and thoughtfully generous, as they were, we need to commit ourselves to thoughtfully and systematically sharing some of whatever money we may have to the glory of God and the well-being of God’s people. Honoring Jesus as our King requires nothing less.

So let us join the wise men and be, ourselves, wise women and wise men in our own time and offer our gold, our worship, our mortality as gifts to Our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that the gifts *he* has for those who truly love him are worth far, far more.

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