

## Feast of the Epiphany - B

Gold, frankincense and myrrh. Everybody knows what gifts the magi brought to the new born king, Jesus. We may not be too sure exactly what myrrh is, but we remember the story well enough to know without a doubt that it was one of the gifts the magi brought.

Why bring gifts, though? After all, the magi could not really expect much in return, could they? They were going to Bethlehem to do homage to the newborn king, but then they would go home again—probably to Persia, which is a long ways away from Bethlehem. What advantage would they get from giving Jesus gifts?

The first reading provides some insight into the rationale for giving gifts to the king of Israel: the light to the nations provides benefits far and wide. Gifts are an expression of rejoicing and gratitude for the blessings which come from his rule.

Because the birth of the king of Israel has been proclaimed to them by the stars themselves, the magi feel confident that, even though he is just a baby, nothing is going to be able to keep from happening what God has ordained. And so they bring their gifts.

Under the circumstances which gifts to bring is an important question. They should be appropriate to what is happening. In one sense, they should try to encapsulate it so that it is clear that the magi understand the meaning of what they have seen in the heavens.

And so, gold to acknowledge that Jesus is the

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legitimate king of Israel, a descendant of the house of David, something Herod could not claim, and so the inheritor of the promises God made that David's line would be eternal.

Frankincense is an interesting choice. It was hard to come by and precious in that sense, but its use was to honor God in temple worship. To offer Jesus the gift of frankincense is to acknowledge that he is more than just a human king. The stars proclaim that he is the one in whom earth and heaven come together. The frankincense is not being given to him to use, it's being given to him as a symbol of the honor in which they hold him.

Myrrh is used in burial rites. It is a spice that counteracts the stench of death. This is the most unexpected of the three gifts. It's not one that you would necessarily expect the recipient to be happy about receiving. But its value comes from the truth it proclaims: That God's incarnation as a human person will not be free from the tragedy that strikes us all. When the Word becomes flesh, he's all in. He shares the human lot all the way, even unto death.

Jesus' death will embody that reality in its most telling experience: the death of the innocent person at the hands of the powerful for nothing other than doing good.

Already at the beginning of his Gospel Matthew lines out what the story is going to be about. All the components are brought into play. In our nostalgia for warm and fuzzy feel-good experiences we may not be

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too inclined to keep that aspect of the story in mind. We might find that it ruins the Christmas spirit.

We may not want to remember what follows, either. How many of our children have heard about the fact that Jesus and Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt in order to escape Herod's murder plot against him. Have we taken it upon ourselves to share with them the story of what happened to the children of Bethlehem?

These passages of the Gospel are not read on Sunday so we might be tempted to gloss over them. I leave it to you parents to determine when is the right time to share this part of the story, but if we never do, what does that say about our acceptance of the Gospel?

To be true to what Jesus came for, we have to be willing to acknowledge the cost. We have to take stock of the fact that God came to save the world, not just the parts of the world that are easy to save, but exactly the parts of the world that are hardest to save.

That's what he wanted to do. The magi show with their gifts that they understand that. What gifts can we bring that show that we understand that, too, in the world that is ours, in the world that needs the light of God now, shining in us who would be Jesus' followers?

Perhaps today's gifts will be less like gold and frankincense and myrrh and more like being attentive, having compassion even for those at a distance from us, and making a personal investment in the changes we see are necessary for Christ's mission on earth to be completed.