

Christmas gifts

What a great carol 'We three kings' is! I don't think we sing it often enough. I don't think it's on any church's regular playlist. To be fair, though as a carol, it lives in the shadow of Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O Come all ye faithful, Silent Night and all the rest of them.

And the more nerdy among us will pick faults in the lyrics – 'Well actually, they weren't really kings, you know', 'well actually, there weren't really three of them', 'well actually, they didn't arrive in Bethlehem at the same time as the shepherds... in fact, they may have arrived two years later!'

And, of course, they brought gifts. But we know the great gift of Christmas is Jesus! And all the other gifts of Christmas time – the socks and undies, the Christmas hampers, the jigsaw puzzles and even the Lego sets pale into insignificance against the gift of Jesus.

When I was a child, my grandparents, Pop and Nanna, formed a Christmas gift giving team. Pop would establish, with each of their four grandchildren, what they wanted to Christmas, and then he would investigate what was available and how that compared to their budget, and then he'd purchase a selection of gifts of similar value for each grandchild. And then Nanna would take over. And no matter how extravagant Pop had been with the presents, Nanna would wrap each of them in the cheapest possible Christmas wrapping paper, secured with the smallest amount of sticky tape possible.

And one of the highlights of Christmas day would be the children ripping through that cheap Christmas paper (which Nanna would dutifully try to salvage for next Christmas), to get to the treasures within. The gifts were tremendously important – but the givers were tremendously important, too.

And so it is with the gifts of the three kings of the carol – the Magi from the east as we heard in our reading from Matthew's gospel, often referred to as 'Wise men'. They brought important gifts: Gold, frankincense and myrrh – and it's because there were three gifts we have inherited the tradition of there being three kings.

We sang about the significance of those gifts in the carol.

First, gold, because Jesus was born a king – and gold was – and is, as we've seen this year – used to crown kings.

Secondly, frankincense. Incense that would be burned by the priests in the temple to offer praise to God. Priests that would serve God, and make sacrifices on behalf of the people. Priests that were intermediaries between God and God's people.

The gift of frankincense foreshadows Jesus, God the Son, being the ultimate intermediary between God and his people. People who had turned away from God and could never find their way back on their own.

We sang in the carol "Prayer and praising, all men raising. Worship Him, God most high" in Jesus, the prophecy we heard from Isaiah was fulfilled: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

And thirdly, myrrh. Gold and frankincense speak to good things for the child in Bethlehem... the myrrh, not so much. While myrrh was also used in ritual incense at the temple, its greater symbolism is of anointing the dead. Mark's gospel tells us that when Jesus was crucified, he was offered wine

mixed with myrrh (Mark 15:23), and John's gospel tells us that following Jesus' death Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea brought mixture of myrrh and aloes to wrap Jesus' body with (John 19:39).

That's what the fourth verse of We three kings speaks of: "its bitter perfume breathes of life of gathering gloom, sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb"

It puts me in mind of opening the first gift and finding a Lego set, the second one, and finding a Darrel Lea Christmas Pudding, and the third one and finding new uniform socks for school.

Hardly the stuff of a cheery Christmas carol!

So that's the three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh – which tell us something about Jesus – as we sang in the last verse of the carol "King and God and Sacrifice", but what of the givers?

There are various traditions that have arisen that have arisen over the years. The first is that there were three kings (or magi or wise men), but there's no indication in the scriptures of how many there were – but it's nice to have three gifts presented by three men in the nativity scene or Christmas pageant (which is what the carol was written for). Matthew does write about them in plural, so we can know that there was more than one.

We don't know exactly where they came from, but the weight of scholarly opinion these days is 'probably India'. But what's important about them being "Magi from the east" who asked "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?", is that they weren't Jews themselves. They weren't part of God's chosen people – they were gentiles, and yet, they received a revelation of Jesus' birth, and they responded to that by travelling all the way from the East (wherever exactly that was) to Jerusalem. A journey of weeks at least, but probably months, and maybe even years.

And the main point of their journey wasn't to give the gifts that we so often associate them with, but it was to worship Jesus. To put aside whatever their own religious traditions were, and worship him. They said "We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:2b) and then "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him." (Matthew 2:11a).

It was only after they'd worshipped him that they presented their gifts. Yes, their gifts were symbolic and important, but they were not as important as Jesus.

The gifts that we give today – or will give tomorrow – are important too, but they're not as important as Jesus. The gifts that we give to our families and our friends speak to our love to them. In many ways they are symbolic. They speak to how much and how well we know each other. They are a way by which we share our wealth and the blessings of our lives with others.

Hopefully, we're more on the gold and frankincense side of gifts rather than the myrrh, but even in our gifts we can recognise and empathise with those who are facing hard times at the moment.

And the gifts we receive are reminders to us that we are part of families and communities too.

It's the same with the gift that we have received from God. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

If we accept that gift, which is freely given, then we are truly part of God's family, part of the body of Christ, part of the community of faith that Jesus established.

And that gift is greater than gold, frankincense or myrrh; greater than all the wealth of the world; it is the gift of God's son, given so that we may not perish but have everlasting life.

Amen.