

The Gifts of the Magi

Lawrence Peak
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One of the most majestic images that comes from the Christmas stories is of the three wise men, the Magi, astrologers, wise men, princes, nobles, aristocrats - whoever they were - coming with their gifts to the baby Jesus and bowing before the Christ Child with their gold, frankincense and myrrh.

How topsy turvy this seems! Great men of high nobility bowing before a tiny baby! And yet down through the ages, when rulers, have been in the presence of Christ, it is they who have bowed and knelt and worshipped. Kings, queens princes potentates, great thinkers and geniuses have all come humbly to do homage to Christ.

This is just one example of the topsy turvy nature of Christ. The Christ who who said

“The last shall be first and the first shall be last”
“He that loses his life for my sake the same shall save it”

And so together with hosts of people down through the ages, we are in good company as we bring our gifts to Christ. We may not be in a position to offer gold or frankincense or myrrh but as the carol reminds us, we can offer our heart.

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| <p>Thou child of man – lo to Bethlehem, The Kings are travelling – travel with them The star of mercy, the star of grace, Shall lead thy heart to its resting place Gold incense myrrh thou canst not bring; Offer thy heart to the infant king. Offer thy heart</p> |
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What does it really mean though to say that we offer him our heart? More specifically from the hymn we will sing together in a moment, we can offer him obedience, lowliness, truth and love and in so doing we find that we are moving away from the accepted wisdom of our everyday world around us.

The world dictates that we should be free spirits - unfettered and capricious. Doing what we like whenever we like. Christ in his topsy turvy way values obedience – to stick to what is right even when it might be hard or risky or unpopular or outright dangerous!

The world encourages us to be proud, forceful and self-assured. Christ in his topsy turvy way values lowliness, gentleness and humility. Not puffed up, not thinking ourselves superior in any way.

And then we come to truth:-

- The world in its wisdom is used to the bending of the truth,
- the almost universal acceptance that the end justifies the means,
- the ability of politicians, corporate and military leaders and others to put slants on what they are presenting,
- to put such a spin on things that what is left bears little resemblance to reality.

So often truth is a disposable item. Christ in his topsy turvy way expects us to acknowledge and speak the truth come what may. In front of Pilate, Jesus was to say "I came to bring truth to the world – All who love the truth are my followers". In an odd way even here, one gets the feeling that things are reversed! It is Pilate who is uncomfortable and uncertain of what is really occurring here.

His famous comment "What is truth?" gives the impression that here is a person thrashing around looking for meaning in life. On the other hand, although threatened with imminent death Jesus was calm and collected almost as if **he** were the one in control.

If we offer this gift to Christ we are committing ourselves to be truthful in all matters without exception and without compromise. Sometimes of course it is better and more sensitive to hold our tongues but never to outrightly bear false witness to our neighbour and anyone else. And this applies to the little as well as the big matters in our lives. To what we tell our children, to our tax returns and the way we deal with the awkward circumstances that often come our way.

Finally we are to offer the gift of love to the Christ Child.

- In our modern day world the word “love” is too often demeaned to just a physical or sexual relationship.
- Too often it is a relationship that is entered into for selfish reasons.
- It is too often fleeting and transient.
- Too often the ideas of selflessness, patience, loyalty and sacrifice are lost.

But not for Christ who said “Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” Indeed God is the essence of love so much so that the Bible says “God is Love”. This is a gift we can lay at the feet of the Christ Child – that we love God and our fellow men and women with all our heart, mind and being whatever this may entail.

*Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim
Gold of obedience and incense of lowliness
Bring and adore him, the Lord is his name.*

*Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine;
Truth in its beauty and Love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on his shrine.*

It’s interesting to note from the hymn that not only can we give gifts to our Lord but as a result he reverses things and we receive from him ten times over!

*Low at his feet lay your burden of carefulness
High on his heart he will bear it for you,
Comfort your sorrows, and answer your prayerfulness
Guiding your steps in the way best for you.*

*These though we bring them in trembling and
fearfulness
He will accept for the name that is dear,
Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
Trust for our trembling, and hope for our fear.*

First there is comfort for our sorrows and I guess we all have sorrows in some form or other at some time or other throughout our lives. Our hearts can ache and we wonder how can we carry on and no-one of us seems to be exempt. What a comfort it is to know that we need never be alone, that God is always close to us - an inexhaustible source of strength

Then the hymn promises answers to our prayerfulness and what a wonderful promise this can be. When we truly pray the way Christ taught us to pray, we connect ourselves to God and the answers to our prayers will follow. Not necessarily the way we prescribe nor necessarily when we expect it (which is usually immediately!) but an answer will be there which we will see surely in the wisdom of hindsight.

The hymn also mentions the gift of guidance “Guiding our steps as may best for thee be”. How much fuller and richer our lives can become if we commit every day and plan to him and ask for his guidance at every step in our lives. If we can pause to ask “What would Christ have done in this circumstance or in that decision we must make?” and pray to our heavenly Father for the wisdom to see the answer, we need no longer to be stumbling in the dark.

The final gifts that he offers us are particularly pertinent as we move into a New Year. They are mornings of joy to replace evenings of tearfulness, trust to replace our trembling and hope to replace our fear.

After the year we have just had I think hope is the gift we need most of all! After the unbelievable tragedy unfolding in the Ukraine so many of us continue to be stunned, saying to ourselves and our friends

How can this be?
Don't we live in a modern, enlightened civilised world?
Haven't we emerged from the dark ages?

Unfortunately, there are still pockets of darkness sprinkled all around the world.

One of the most distressing pockets of darkness in this Christmas Season is the Middle East. Our beautifully quaint image of little Bethlehem has been shattered with hate and murder and the quiet serenity we sing about has been supplanted by rockets, mortar fire, helicopter gunships and the angry screams of rock throwing crowds and the anguished sobbing of family and friends as they bury yet another victim.

Yes it's a hard world we now live in, but it was a hard world too in those early times! Can you imagine the image of Herod and his troops smashing into the lives of every family with a little baby boy.

Can you imagine the unspeakable horror of your little child being slaughtered before your very eyes!

That too was a pocket of darkness; and yet, in spite of this unfathomable evil, God's plan was still being worked out. The baby Messiah **was** safe, there **were** angels to guide and guard and in the long run here we are 2000 years on, to worship and adore Christ. We are not here to worship Herod. He is long since gone and his kingdom has long since crumbled into nothing. With all his pomp and majesty and fine robes and power, what legacy did Herod leave for mankind? And yet the world has never been the same since the birth of that little babe in Bethlehem.

So there **is** hope! And God's plan will outlast any and every pocket of darkness --and what a wonderful gift that is for us as we move into the New year with all its uncertainties and challenges.

God is indeed working his purpose out no matter what happens and we can be strong and secure by His side.

- The wise men brought their gifts to the Christ child in humble adoration.
- At Christmas time we had a wonderful time giving gifts to each other.

- We too can bring gifts to the Christ child, obedience, lowliness, truth and love
- And in return we receive in abundance –
- comfort for our sorrows,
- answers to our prayers,
- guidance for our everyday living,
- mornings of joy to replace our tearfulness,
- trust for our trembling and
- hope for our fear.

What better way to move into a New Year! **Amen.**