

Christmas gifts

We three kings of orient are...

Before I go any further, I need to tell you that there may not have been three of them... the bible only tells us there were two or more, and they were almost certainly not kings – they were magi, or astrologers (which in those days were the same thing as astronomers) or, as we often say, ‘wise men’.

But to travel from their home in the east (generally thought to be somewhere in India) to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, would have been costly and dangerous – they would have likely had guards and attendants, and if they were wealthy they would probably have been well dressed, so I think they could easily be mistaken for kings...

And, of course, as we heard in our last carol, and in our readings, they brought gifts. And they were expensive gifts, but they were very thoughtful gifts – and the best gifts are always the most thoughtful ones, aren’t they? The gifts where the giver knows the recipient so well, that they can choose a great gift without asking the person what they want or consulting the list that the person wrote ‘to Santa’.

The Magi from the east, the wise men, brought important and thoughtful gifts: Gold, frankincense and myrrh – and it’s because the scriptures tell us about the three gifts that the tradition of there being three kings has developed.

The gifts of the Magi were expensive, and thoughtful, and deeply symbolic. The Magi, of course, hadn’t met Jesus before, they hadn’t met or even exchanged correspondence with Joseph and Mary, but they did know who he was and what he would do.

The first gift was gold, because Jesus was born a king on Bethlehem’s plain – and gold was – and is, as we’ve seen in recent years – used to crown kings. Gold is a symbol of royalty.

The second gift was frankincense. Incense that would be burned by the priests in the temple to offer praise to God. (It’s still used in worship in some traditions today). And along with burning the incense, the priests that would make

sacrifices on behalf of the people. The people weren't worthy to make sacrifices themselves, but instead relied on the priests as intermediaries between God's people and God.

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)

The last of the three gifts brought by the Magi, was myrrh. Gold and frankincense speak of good things for the child in Bethlehem... the myrrh, not so much. While myrrh was also used in ritual incense at the temple, it was most often known for 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 (John 19:39) before it was sealed in the tomb.

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

That's pretty dark, isn't it? Hardly, the stuff of a cheery Christmas carol!

As I said, the three gifts are symbolic: the gold, frankincense and myrrh – all tell us something about who Jesus was – far beyond the helpless newborn who lay in a manger in Bethlehem – as we sang in the last verse of the carol, Jesus would be "King and God and Sacrifice".

Important though the gifts are, the most important thing we learn from the Magi, is what they did. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?", but 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 to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem.

And when they got to Bethlehem, they put aside whatever their own religious traditions might have been, and worshipped Jesus! 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).

In fact, 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 himself.

The gifts that we give this Christmas are important too, and hopefully they're thoughtful as well, but they're not as important as Jesus. The gifts that we give to our families and our friends show our love for 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.

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. Jesus tells us "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.

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.