

What Gift Shall We Bring?

While Christmas was just two weeks ago, it feels to me as if it's farther away than that. A lot of decorations have come down, kids are back in school, everyone's back at work.

W. H. Auden in his great poem *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* writes poignantly about these days after Christmas. Listen to a portion:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully --
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. ... In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance.

We have traveled from the manger, back to our ordinary lives. But Epiphany gives us another journey – that of the Wise men or the Magi to the Christ Child.

And while the magi are an important part of the whole story, technically they don't arrive on the scene 'til later - much later. We just heard that the magi found Mary, Joseph and the CHILD in a HOUSE. Not Mary, Joseph and the baby in a stable / manger, but the child in a house. And since Herod ordered the slaughter of all boys under 2, Jesus may have been 1-2 years old at the time.

I'm glad that the church has suggested that the story of the wisemen is told again apart from our actual celebration of Christmas when we focus on Jesus' birth, the choir of angels and the shepherds. I like having a Sunday to reflect on at least this aspect of the Christmas Story before moving too far from it, into our ordinary days.

The other thing that's fun to notice about this story, is that there are not THREE kings / magi. There are three gifts, but there could have been only two kings or twenty kings. We assume three because of the three gifts. And these gifts - are really strange gifts for a newborn or young child. Certainly not practical. Sensible gifts would have been baby food, clothes for a growing toddler, perhaps a little toy – not a useless lump of gold and two bottles of perfume.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh. Typically these are understood to be symbols of who Jesus was and who he would become.

Gold is a gift for a king. This child Jesus is royal and kingly, and will bring about a new kingdom or realm. Frankincense - used by the priests - because he is God come to earth. Myrrh - used in embalming the dead, foreshadows his suffering and death as Savior of the world.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh might **seem** rather useless gifts, but what **do** you give this child who is the all-powerful God who controls the stars to such an extent that a particularly bright star travels westward and stops over the place where Jesus and his parents were living?

In Jesus, the Lord of the universe reaches down from heaven and touches the earth, descends in love to come to us, in the flesh, as one of us, a person who comes to do battle with Herod and all evil in this world. What is the appropriate gift for that person?

When you consider the greatness of the gift we have been given in Christ, - the wonder and majesty of it all - what can we give in return? My little offering, my yearly pledge, my commitment to acts of service and kindness... even these can seem puny in comparison.

And I would imagine that even the magi with their precious gifts must have realized that their expensive presents were hardly adequate for this child, the God who has become a human and now rests in his mother's arms. And maybe that's just the point.

Consider how amazing it is that God - the creator of the universe - has decided to become a human being, beginning earthly life like we all do, as a little child, to show us what true, real, unconditional love will look like.

What ever can we give in return? God's gift to us is just too great, too wondrous for us to find a gift worthy of return. Perhaps all we can do is, like those men from the east, thrust forward our ever so humble presents, and yet at the same time the best we can offer: a bag of gold, the fragrant oils and perfumes of frankincense and myrrh.

Maybe that's always the way it is with our gifts to God. The gifts that we offer here in worship: our praise, our music, the words of our liturgy, the words we whisper in prayer, the envelopes we put in the offering plate - just gold, frankincense, and myrrh - small gifts in comparison to God's goodness and love toward us.

All we can ever do, I think, is to offer God the best of what we have at the moment.

This reminds me of that time when Jesus had grown into adulthood, and a woman comes in and extravagantly wastes a whole bottle of expensive perfume all over Jesus. The disciples cry, "What a waste!" But Jesus says, "Let her alone. She has done a beautiful thing, anointing me for my burial."

Jesus is about to make a really extravagant gift on the cross, and so he accepts this woman's extravagant gift. She was expressing her love for Jesus in an unreserved and unrestrained way, and what she did **was** wasteful – there can be no doubt about that. But like the magi, she gave the best of what she had.

The story goes of an old professor who visited a former student of his whose first child had recently been born. He presented the parents with a gift for the baby, a book, all wrapped in fine paper. Imagine their surprise and bewilderment when, upon unwrapping the gift, they discovered that it was a book, a very old, leather-bound copy of Shakespeare's plays.

What a strange gift for a baby! How odd. An old book, written in archaic language, given to a baby who will not be able to read it for years to come; and who frankly may never actually like Shakespeare.

And then they realized: the gift was not the book; the gift was the giver. The old professor had given himself. He had given the child that thing most precious to himself - his own love of language, his admiration for Shakespeare. His gift was an expression of his deepest joy at the birth of the child, his hope for the future of this new human being.

The best gifts that we can offer the Christ-child are the gifts of ourselves. The gold, frankincense and myrrh of the magi are trivial and quite useless for the savior of the world. But as useless as these gifts are for God, they are a sign of the way the magi gave of themselves.

That's actually how I think of our work here around the church - the many ways that you give of yourselves - your time, your enthusiasm, your resources.

Because you all have gifts - God has made you good at many things, and has given you passions and skills and interests - for the purpose of serving Him. It's a small thing really, to serve as a Deacon or in the Nursery, to fix a broken light fixture or make some coffee, to deliver some flowers or donate a winter coat.

It's when, in the giving of these gifts, that we consciously recognize that we are responding to God's love given in Jesus, that they grow from small and simple acts to take their place in God's great plan and endeavor to draw all people to Him.

In this season of new starts and starting over with the turn of the calendar page, I invite you to find a new or renewed way to make a gift of yourself to our Lord, who more than made a gift of Himself to us.

How can you be a beacon of Christ's love where you work or go to school?
Who in your life could use an extra dose of compassion or encouragement?

Where can you share your unique talents in a new way?
How can we give God, not what's left over, not our second best, not what's simply 'good enough', but the best of what we have to offer?

The magi, having met the Christ child, went home by another road. I wonder how different our journeys and our journey together will be in 2023 for having done another lap around the Christian calendar and met Jesus yet again.

I wonder what our gold, frankincense and myrrh will look like this year.
Whatever form they take, may they reflect in every way, God's great love in Christ.

Amen.