

Wisdom. Money. Worship. Grief. Joy.

The Magi gave gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

We think of the Magi, or “the Wise Ones” coming to see Jesus, the One born to be King of the Jews, and bringing gifts.

(We do not know how many they were, or their gender or their status as royalty, academics, astrologers or whatever. The Greek word Magi means only Wise Ones)

Firstly I want to look at how they demonstrate wisdom, and secondly what their gifts symbolize.

Wisdom is different from knowledge. There are many learned people who are not wise, and many people with little education who are wise. It is said that our western culture has traded wisdom for knowledge and power. We can now do almost anything, but we have lost the ability to know why or whether we should.

Gazing into the stars the Magi saw a bright new star. It seemed to point to Judea, a small troubled country under foreign imperial control. A risky place of insurrection and violence. But something inside them said “Go! Go and see who this is!”

Part of wisdom is about learning to listen to the inner voice. You need to practice inner silence to allow this voice to speak. Like learning to turn all the radios, TVs and other sounds off, re-tuning your ears and sitting very still for a long while to hear if there is another sound in your home, or in your heart.

Arriving at the palace, a place where you would expect a king to be born, they find nothing, but are given a clue. Wisdom accepts that you usually don’t get it right first, but need to follow an often long line of steps before you get close.

The brightness and clarity of the star gives them great hope of being close. They repeatedly check in with the original call to their journey. Arriving in the home of peasants, not a likely place to find a King, they are not put off by what they don’t see, or what they do see, but trust to the inner truth of their quest. They focus on what they came to find. Singleness of mind, not being thrown off, distracted or repulsed are all parts of wisdom. Wisdom is the pursuit of what you need, not what you want.

The Gifts then have another story to tell.

Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

They knew this king was more than just another monarch. Foretold in the stars this one had something divine about him. What do you bring to God?

What do you bring to God each time you pause to pray each day at home?

What do you bring to God each time you come to church on Sunday?

The Magi’s gift-teaching is informative and difficult

Gold is money. Since we disconnected from the “gold standard”, who knows when, we stopped using real gold as money. Now it is dollars. So they brought money.

Money itself is not of much use. It is what it gives you that matters. Money represents power, or safety, security or protection from chance. It represents freedom to make choices, to have needs and whims fulfilled. Money represents comfort. It represents status, clothing, cars, housing. To give money is to give this away. It is to offer to go without as much of these things as we presently have. It is to trust that this foolish act of giving money away, will not be foolish, but will in fact bring you greater safety, security, peace and well-being. But.....you have no proof of this!

Frankincense is a ritual object. It is the incense used through out the ancient world as part of worship. So they brought worship. I was talking to a post-christian friend who said part of her new year resolution was to deepen her spiritual practice. I asked what this was. She told me she sits in meditation each morning, and she sends healing energy into the Earth. I asked her to describe this to me. She wills goodness, and health, balance and peace, healing from damage and newness of life into the planet and all that lives in and on it. To spend time in intentional willing of love to something much greater than yourself, with no sign that it is making a difference, that you are not just wasting your time, but believing that your gift of time, of focus of effort, of will somehow make a difference....this is what I know as worship. Being on a retreat in a monastery some years ago, much against my usual practice of getting a good sleep, I remember getting up at 4am to join in the night prayers. I realized that the only reason to do this was worship. I was quietly chuckling at how surprised God would be to find me doing this. It was gift of pure love to God. I knew I had absolutely nothing to gain by this. Worship is just, only and simply a gift given to the divine. No strings attached.

Myrrh is about death. When someone dies in Canada we wash their body, clothe it in the person's best clothes and place it in a casket. In the ancient world they washed the body, and then anointed it with perfumes and with healing ointments and wrapped it in new cloth. This was not done by hospital or funeral home staff, but by the family. And they wept as they washed it. And they mourned as they combed out the hair, and they cried out as they anointed the scars and bruises, and they groaned as they used myrrh, the anointing of death. It was the first leg of the journey of grief for a love lost. Myrrh is the symbol of grief. It is the path of loss, of letting go. Myrrh is a sign of suffering as a consequence of love. Myrrh is the warning that the path of love is costly and wonderful and vibrant and broken hearted. These things belong together.

Epiphany is both about the "showing forth" (Gk *Epi forth-Phaneo to show*) the Christ within the child Jesus. It is also showing forth the path of following the Christ in Jesus.

The path is found by inner listening.

It is a path of frequent twists and turn and unexpected junctions. Matthew (7;14) says "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few"

It is a path followed because you realise you need to, not because you want to.

It is a path which will ask you to give away some of your security, status and power. It will cost you money.

It is a path walked by worship. By simply giving of your self to the unseen, unaccountable source of life. It is a path which leads you through the valley of the shadow of death, and you will hurt in your heart because you have walked it in love.

And lastly, when the Magi found the end of their journey, they were filled with great joy. It is a path of unparalleled Joy.

May the teachings of the Epiphany settle in your heart!