

The Gifts of the Magi, Epiphany

I invite you to close your eyes and imagine yourself, not in a cold place, but in a warm one. In a nice, hot, lovely place. Imagine you are outside, sitting or lying with your eyes closed. You are awake, but resting and comfortable.

Can you hear anything? First of all, what can you hear in the distance? Perhaps waves breaking, or the sound of wind in trees, or maybe it is traffic, or a truck slowly climbing up a long hill...

Can you feel a breeze or a gentle movement of the air? What can you smell? Perhaps it is the salt smell of the ocean, or maybe the smell of dry earth or of the grasses behind you on the hill. Or...can you imagine the smell of fresh baked bread, just out of the oven? Mmmmmm..

Let your hand gently slip down towards the ground. Imagine you are touching something. Is it a concrete floor or a soft carpet? Is it grass, or dirt, or sand? Perhaps your hand touches the hand of someone you love who is next to you. Allow yourself to notice how that feels for a while.

Now, keeping your eyes closed still, very gently notice the seat you are now on, here, today. How your body touches it, where the seat is comfortable or where it is a bit hard. Then notice the sounds around you, both really close by, and further away, even out of the building. And what can you smell here?

And now I invite you to gently open your eyes and be back with us all.

“Epiphany” comes from two Greek words that mean “to show forth” or, “to bring to light something which has not been noticed or seen”. It is like the word “reveal”.

And the Magi, who possibly did not speak Aramaic, as Mary and Joseph did, revealed to them, and all those who were there.....they revealed that this little squidge of a newborn baby was of immense value, of holiness, a child of life and death.

They did not say much, but they communicated by gifts.

Gold.

Who has gold here today? Can you hold up your hand if you have gold? Keep your hand up if the gold is on your hand. Keep it up if it is a wedding ring. Ahh! Now put down your hands but touch that ring as I go on.

For most of us the only gold we will own is a ring. For weddings we use gold because it is the most valuable metal we know. Because it is pure and does not tarnish. Because it is a circle without beginning or end. because it makes, by touch, a reminder of vows made and the love which they expressed on a day, and still hold true today. Gold is given for other reasons often these objects are bearers of the same truths in different ways.

So love beyond value, truth which cannot tarnish, commitment without end; this is gold.

Frankincense.

Incense is a mixture of tree gum and spices that smolder and burn and give off a rich, fragrant smoke. Most of us have lost the real *sense* of smell, but as the first part of this sermon may have reminded you, smell, more than any other sense, reaches deep into our memory and emotions, bypassing the thinking part of our minds. Smell can stop you in your tracks and pull you back to a moment you didn't even know you

remembered. The smell of rain first falling on a dirt road on a hot afternoon. That takes me back to my childhood in Africa as if tugged by a rope!

Frankincense has been used in worship for centuries. It is costly, representing an offering of value made to God. It fills the air with its scent. And the smoke rises upwards as a sign of our prayer rising to God. These symbols and the sense of smell all lead us into a way of knowing God, and of becoming present to Him in worship

Incense invites us to be pulled out of our world of known and understood reality into a deeper spiritual place, a place of heart and memory and feeling, to meet the God who is mystery, beyond comprehension yet touches our souls. Incense is a way to find our way deep inside where God abides with us.

Myrrh.

Myrrh is an ointment and a perfume. For centuries it was used, along with frankincense, for its healing properties. It was used in the form of a waxy, oily, creamy mixture to heal wrinkled, dry or broken skin. It helped heal and regenerate skin and possibly to combat infections and heal wounds. It is known that it was widely used in ancient Egypt to anoint the bodies of the dead for burial.

For, me, because the skin around my finger ends often cracks in cold dry weather, Myrrh would be my equivalent of Polysporin! But for Lucy, my wife, it is those delicious smelling hand-creams, those lotions in bottles and jars, and all that girly, smelly stuff that I would never put on, but I am delighted that she does.

Myrrh is about the gentling of our bodies, about caring for the physical-ness of ourselves and acknowledging that we are made of skin and bone, muscle and fat, and all the other parts too many to enumerate. We are “incarnate”, made of flesh. And the Magi gift points us to the wonder that God is not a wiffly, vaporous or merely an ethereal, transcendent something. But God is to be found here in our midst. Jesus, as someone once said, is “God with skin on”. Myrrh invites us to notice God in the touch of another’s hand, to look for God in the face of a beggar, a friend, a stranger or the person you exchange the Peace with at church.

Myrrh teaches us that Jesus is around us in flesh and blood, but only to be perceived in spirit and by faith. Immanuel, God with us.

Today, on my “golden” table from Arabia, we have a jar of sweet smelling ointment, and we have incense, which we will burn as prayers are offered, as gifts are offered, and as bread and wine are filled with God’s presence in the consecration.

Look upon the “golden” table. Smell the scent of perfume. watch the smoke rise up to God. Open your hearts, souls and minds to what these will tell you, and to what God may say to you through them today on this Festival of the Epiphany. Do not think too much about it, just let yourself experience it in Grace.