

## “THE GIFT OF MYRRH”

Lectionary: Year C, Christmas II  
Text: Matthew 2: 1-12  
January 3, 2010  
All Saints' Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Hugh E. Brown, III, D. Min.

We have a bit of Epiphany in our liturgy today, particularly in our Gospel reading from Matthew. Epiphany comes from the Greek word that means, “manifestation,” or “showing forth.” What is manifest is Christ, the light of the world.

Beginning next Sunday with the Baptism of our Lord, and continuing on the Second Sunday of Epiphany with the wedding at Cana, and on through to the Transfiguration of Jesus on a Mountaintop, this time in our Church calendar, will all demonstrate Christ's glory.

It is apt to have two grand themes: incarnation and epiphany. Both of these momentous spiritual movements meet in this morning's liturgy.

Incarnation is a celebration of God's becoming human.

Epiphany is a celebration of Christ's divinity. Human and divine transfigure all creation.

The key word here is ALL; it is the most radical and difficult dimension of the Gospel.

The “wise men” or Magi respond to Christ's glory. They are not Jews, the people of Jesus. They are not necessarily even religious—or spiritual. God works through very human reason, inquiry and just plain sense of adventure to reach those who are most unlikely candidates for evangelism. They are scholars and scientists of the ancient world.

One “take-away” from this story is unavoidable. Jesus is for everyone. He is not just for his own people; Jesus is for everybody. He is a universal Messiah.

Where are the “Magi” today?

One way to go with this story would be talk about the Magi as those traveling a long, hard way to Christ outside the church.

Do ALL persons find the glory and light of Christ here in this place? What gifts might they bring?

Do we make room for genuine seekers here? Do we provide, through our worship and community, the “space” for all who might not be able to articulate their spiritual search in religious language?

Do we provide “spiritual home and space” simply “to trust the questions?”

Do you feel comfortable bringing your questions here?

But let's go a bit deeper with the integration of Epiphany glory and Incarnation, humanity through the alchemy of all.

Where are the Magi inside the Church?

We are told the Magi brought gifts; two of these gifts disclose divinity and kingship. Gold indicates kingship. Frankincense discloses divinity.

We might think of all among us who have hidden talents and gifts which might manifest the glory of Christ through divinity.

And yet, there is another gift—Myrrh—a substance used in embalming, which points to the sacrificial death of Christ.

Might the journey of the Magi convey an important truth: those who seek are also those who have suffered? Might our sufferings, not just our wholeness, be a gift to the church?

In fact, may our sufferings be the very force enabling our spiritual journey?

Some of our deepest questions, desires, and longings come from the gift of Myrrh.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century preacher Lancelot Andrews aptly describes the journey of the biblical magi in these words,

"A Cold morning they had of it, at this time of year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the un farthest off, the very dead of winter."

Oh yes, there are many magi here who are living "a cold morning they had of it." And many are singing those haunting words of a piece Sarah Patterson will sing as a solo in a minutes, "I wonder as I wander out under the sky... why Jesus the savior did come forth to die..for poor, ornery people like you and like I."

And, if you recognize the words, A Cold Coming We had of it," as from T. S. Eliot, we learn that Eliot was a devotee of Lancelot Andrews and begins his great poem, the Journey of the Magi with the words, A Cold Coming We had of it..."

But, Eliot then adds a bit of "bite' in the phrase, "Were we led all the way for Birth or Death? There was Birth, certainly, We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different. This birth was hard and bitter, agony for us, like Death, our death...We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease in the old dispensations, with an Alien people clutching their Gods. I should be glad of another death."

Perhaps both Andrews and Eliot, and all who know the gift of Myrrh, know the journey of the Magi as the reality of authenticity and truth consistently challenging an often complacent spiritual life, and an all too comfortable Church.

Perhaps they are suggesting too, that we find the Light of Christ precisely in the all too human travails of being outsiders, wayfarers, seekers—and the reality of life experience which comes with such ambiguous status—oppression, abuse, illness, estrangement.

Perhaps we need to listen to the voices of the Magi within us, especially that one who gives the gift of Myrrh. These are often the voices of truth.

On a day in which our gifted Director of Christian Education, Andrew Van Kirk, continues to gather a wonderful group of young people for Confirmation class in the parish library, my mind and heart return to another kind of confirmation class.

The class was to a group of street-wise, African-American teens several years ago in my former parish of St. Philip's, Baden Parish in Prince George's County, Maryland-- and their somewhat complacent white priest was doing the 'same ole, same ole.'" Of course none of it was bad—it was akin to gold and frankincense, gifts of glory, and honor, the blessings of Anglican authority, scripture, history and the like.

And then a young lady who certainly had a "cold coming of it," broke through some of the status quo and distributed the unwelcomed token of myrrh.

Her name was Kriantea and she had a question. "Rev. Brown, I want to be here and I do love the Lord, but, before I can make the commitment to Christ you are describing as what Confirmation is all about, I need to ask a couple of questions."

"Great-shoot," I replied somewhat glibly.

"When I became pregnant at age 14, I prayed and prayed to God to end the pregnancy because I could not have an abortion. I figured, too, if I was faithful and did the right thing, he would do the right thing by me. But, my daughter was born, and God I love her. But this is still not right. I know I did not make a good choice, but I also know God answers prayer. But he did not answer my prayer.

"And (with a smile know and a twinkle in her eyes), now that I have a

beautiful daughter, I realize that prayer was mean and evil, why didn't God punish me by taking her away from me? Why would he let me get away with such horrible thoughts? How could God be so good to me when I did not deserve it?"

And, then, the floodgates opened. "Rev. Brown would Jesus believe in reparations for the Black Community because of slavery?" And, another, looking at a white picture of Christ in the Window, "Rev. Brown, why do we have a white picture of Jesus in a black church?" And another, "Why was Jesus white?"

And, then, finally, the real deal: "Rev. Brown, we don't get a chance to talk with you very much—you always seem so busy. Maybe we can just talk for a while. Maybe this class can be a dialogue with us."

I am not going to give you the outcome of this dialogue; the point is not the response I gave but the mutual learning that took place—a true class of confirmation of our mutual faith in Jesus Christ among a priest and some sharp kids who were not afraid of questions—even questions pushing the envelope more than a bit. I think we all found a star of newfound spiritual friendship and a bit of new imagination which leads to yes, new birth, but also death—death to closed pretense and sterile dogmatism that, in the end, is actually pretty stupid.

As my former boss and mentor Jim Wallis of Sojourners puts it—how you see Jesus is where you sit in your life.

You know, sisters and brothers of All Saints, something truly happens when Christianity "gets real," and begins a dialogue with those who have the gift of Myrrh to offer—the gift of pain, suffering, life and death.

Christianity really gets real when it ceases to be a monologue and begins a dialogue. And Jesus truly becomes alive when those Christians of Frankincense

and Gold are confronted by the voices from the margins through the gift of Myrrh.

T. S. Eliot once write that the function of philosophy is more like the function of poetry: "A metaphysic may be accepted or rejected without our assuming that from the practical point of view, it is either true or false. The point is that the world of practical verification has no definite frontiers, and that it is the business of philosophy to keep the frontiers open."

You don't have to go to an inner city black church and listen to street-smart youth to have your religion "get real," and "crack the frontiers open."

It is possible to accept a Magi with the gift of Myrrh without leaving your home.

Listen to your life. Listen to the pain and suffering you have, and are experiencing. I promise you in the name of the Gospel that it will teach you something and guide you to bright star of greater authenticity and truth this New Year.

And this Star will guide you to the one who saved your soul through pain and the hard word of the cross and, if nothing else, guide you and me to a good dose of humility and a newly opened heart; For Christ enters in when our defenses, arrogance and self-justifications are broken and we discover that the broken heart holds open the doors for new frontiers--and the gift of new life comes with the ironic blessing of a cold coming of it--another death.

Amen!