

5th January 2025 – Epiphany: Matthew 2:1-12 ‘Bringing our gifts to Jesus’

So today is the 12th day of Christmas – and no, I haven’t managed to arrange 12 drummers drumming, though if you look at my record collection and my love of old dance music that can be easily rectified – and you’ll regret it, I promise you. I won’t, but you will. (Alise is nodding her head vigorously at this point.) More importantly, obviously, I hope you’re all taking your decorations down by the end of today, or you’ll have to keep them up all year... that’s the deal.

I wonder how you feel as the official Christmas season comes to an end? Sad that we won’t sing any more carols after today until next December? Disappointed at ending all those treasured traditions that we dust off once a year? Or maybe just relieved that the relentless Christmas carousel has finally wound down and normal life can resume? Probably a mixture of all of these things. In perhaps the only profound reflection we heard in all the Christmas telly this year, someone in one of the programmes remarked that Christmas is like a magnifying glass – it takes whatever you’re feeling and intensifies it. If you’re happy, Christmas brings greater joy, if you’re sad it might be the opposite. So, as we put down the festive magnifying glass again for a year, where are we? PAUSE

One of the strange things about this moment – at least to our modern Christmas – is that as soon as we say Christmas is over, suddenly the Wise Men appear, like those guests who always arrive late to a party. Much as in the story, we look through the shimmering post-Christmas haze and there they are – ethereal, exotic figures on camels on the horizon, trekking towards us. Why now? The problem of course, is that our modern Christmas effectively swallows up both Advent before it, and Epiphany after it. So the Wise Men or Kings or Magi (to give them their proper name) get shoehorned into the nativity – shepherds one side, Magi the other – when that isn’t what happened at all. The Magi clearly arrive months later; which is why traditionally they only appear at the *end* of the Christmas season. They’re really a different chapter in the nativity story altogether.

And what a chapter it is. Few characters in the bible grab people’s attention like the Magi. Who were they? Where did they live? What exactly was the star? Why does God invite foreign astrologers into the greatest story at all? Their practices are banned by the Jewish law, and in the Old Testament they only appear as wicked stooges, never as the good guys.

It makes no sense – and at one level that’s the point. **What God is doing in coming to this earth as Jesus, the divine Son, is so much bigger than anyone could grasp.** In a way, you know something big is up when the two groups of people who get the ringside seats are two groups despised by proper, respectable religious people: ceremonially unclean shepherds and heathen stargazers. ‘Behold I do a new thing – do you not perceive it?’

But there is more going on here – as always in Matthew’s gospel, there are theological undertones at play. In Matthew, Jesus is the new Israel: he fulfils everything that God’s people were meant to be. The first few chapters effectively retell the story of Israel’s formation, this time re-enacted through Jesus – something which starts with a chap being called from Ur and told to go to the land where God would show him. Ring any bells? That’s Abraham in Genesis 12 – and here, at the start of Jesus’ own story, some blokes from a place quite near Ur go to the same land. And **what was the point of Abraham’s journey?: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ That was the one bit of God’s promises to Abraham that hadn’t happened yet. And now, it is** – through another significant journey from somewhere near Ur to the land God led them to. Because they are quite obviously different, the Magi symbolically represent ‘all nations’, and they bring with them gold and incense, just like Isaiah prophesies in chapter 60 of his book – another fulfilment of Old Testament promises.

But if that suddenly makes you think – does that mean that the Magi’s gifts are just made up to fit the prophecy, don’t worry – gold, incense and myrrh were all things they used in their magic, so they would have been natural things for the Magi to bring. Although that makes them even more remarkable gifts, when you think about it...

And today, I want to focus on those gifts. There's so much we can say about the Magi, so many different themes we could explore in a talk: the value of seeking Jesus, the way that God is at work in surprising people, the importance of sometimes taking a faith-filled risk, and if any of those strike a bell, don't ignore it. But I want the first sermon of the year to focus on something practical. What do the Magi's gifts mean for us, too?

We all know the gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. So, let's look at each in turn – starting with **GOLD**. There are, of course, lots of ways we can show Jesus is king in our lives – worship is all about that, isn't it? The word is an abbreviation of 'worth-ship' – this person is worthy of honour. Our whole lives are worship. But gold is still a fundamental part of that. What we spend our money on tells us what or who we worship. C.S. Lewis once said: 'a bank statement is a theological document, it tells us what and who we worship.' REPEAT

Christmas is always a challenge, financially – but as we look forward to 2025, we still have to ask ourselves the question: will we honour Jesus with our gold this year? If Jesus took a look at your bank statements, what would he be thinking?

Second, **MYRRH** – which reminds us that Jesus had a special destiny. His life changed the course of history, but his death is at heart of his mission, right from the beginning, as Simeon warned Mary in the temple a few weeks later. His name means 'God saves', and his sacrificial death 30 or so years later was the only way to satisfy both God's perfect justice and his perfect mercy.

Myrrh is the most striking point at which the Easter story intrudes, if you like, into the Christmas story. And even if it jars, it's a healthy reminder of what lies at the heart of our good news, what St Paul calls the things of 'first importance': 'that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.' (1 Cor 15:3-4)

The 12 days of Christmas might be ending but we are *always* Easter people. And myrrh reminds us to keep the cross at the centre of our lives. As the evangelist J John is fond of saying: never forget that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. (REPEAT) This year, will you keep the main the main thing the main thing? Will the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection inspire you daily to worship with your lips and your lives?

Last gift – **FRANKINCENSE** – which reminds us that Jesus was an offering to God. Incense was used in the temple for sacrifices and also when prayers were offered. So, it has this double meaning – we've just looked at Jesus' sacrifice, so let's finish by thinking about prayer.

We all know that there is nothing more important than prayer, but we also all know that prayer is the hardest thing. Who finds it easy to pray?... Let's admit that we all find it tough – but it's good, at the start of the year, to look at ourselves and think – how are we going to grow in prayer this year?

Here's lots of ideas – see if one jumps out at you: maybe you need a better time. Maybe you need a better place – not necessarily a single location: if you pray better when you walk, go walking. Maybe you need a new method – there are lots of resources available: Lectio 365, Pray as you go, Daily Prayer to name just three – all of them free on the internet. Or maybe you need to meet to pray with people more often. Group prayer is exponentially more effective than individual prayer – if three people pray together it's not just 3, it's 3x3 – try it and see....

So as I close: **three gifts of the Magi, offered to Jesus. Three invitations for us, too, as we begin this year:** will we give him our gold, will we grow in prayer, and will we keep our focus on the cross and resurrection – will we keep the main thing the main thing? The Magi teach us ultimately that true worship is active, and costly – but the reward is priceless. May we, too, experience their joy as we offer our lives and our gifts to Jesus this year. Amen.