

3 January, 2010; Christmas 2C
Jer 31:7-14; Ps 84:1-8
Eph 1:3-6; 15-19a; Matt 2:1-12

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A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to spend Christmas in Spain. Christmas itself was a quiet day: shops and public spaces were closed, churches were open, people stayed at home with their family and friends. But twelve days later, the country came alive on Epiphany. The business of everyday life was suspended as crowds poured into the streets and squares for the parade of the Three Kings. Down the cobbled street they came, larger than life, tossing candy to all they passed, as bright-eyed children dove between people's legs to catch it and musicians played gaily. In Spain, apparently, Christmas is a day of quiet veneration; the giving and receiving of gifts takes place with the arrival of the magi, people laying themselves out for one another as those first three visitors gave of themselves to the newborn Christ.

And what did they give, those three strange men who came from the East following the star to see where it might lead? What wild dreams propelled them, that they left behind everything they had, bearing to Christ only their own selves, and a few gifts that they intended to leave behind? Scripture tells us little about them: only that they were wise, that they studied the stars. Tradition has given them names: Gaspar. Balthasar. Melchior. And it tells us that their arrival was the first revelation of the glory of Christ to the world, the expansion of his family beyond flesh and blood to each one of us here today. The gifts they brought reveal his identity: gold, to crown him a king; frankincense, the sweet incense offered to deities; myrrh, used in burial rites, to foretell his death.

And yet, as many of us may have seen this Christmas, gifts tend to reveal as much about the giver as about the recipient. We bring to one another what we think our loved one will want to receive, and in so doing, we show one another our image of ourselves, our image of them, and the hopes and dreams of our hearts. The gifts of the magi are the first offerings of humankind to God: after the simple veneration of the shepherds, they are the way we chose to offer ourselves. They consecrate our humanity, lay it at the feet of the godhead, asking for blessing, asking for grace.

Gold, they bring him. Gold, the most valuable metal known (at the time) to humankind. They bring him their best, for he should be the recipient of all that is good. But in so doing, they proclaim that what they are, what they have, is worthy of being presented to God. They had no false modesty which would have brought them cringing into the divine presence, muttering that they were corrupted, that they were unworthy, that they were nothing. They were people of substance, and they knew their worth. We human beings may have been formed of the dust, but we were formed by the hands of God, which bestow dignity and honor, and gild everything they touch. Within each one of us dwells the divine *logos*, the living word of God, a core of burning, golden light which consecrates us as vessels to hold the presence of God. And so gold is also the purity which dwells within us, a reminder that, before there were pain and evil in the world, God looked at creation, looked at us, and pronounced us good. And so, even as we kneel with the magi before our redeemer, we know that we are worthy of being redeemed, for we are nothing less than the handiwork of God.

Frankincense, however, is the creation of humankind, the product of our labor in working with the fruits of the earth to make them more beautiful, more powerful, more worthy of serving God. It is a form of faithfulness to order our work in ways that beautify and heal the world we have been given. Perhaps that is why incense appears in the ancient Hebrew cult and in the book of Revelation as the image of our prayers, for both prayer and work are faithfulness made visible. When the Lamb of God appears in Revelation, "the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." (Rev 5:8) And so, as we work and pray each day, we bear to Christ the gift of the magi,

the relentless faithfulness which impels us to offer ourselves and all we do to our God, holding our lives up to that blinding, revealing light, by which alone we can see and know whether our hearts and our works bear good fruit, fruit worthy of our God.

And then, myrrh: the scent and savor of mortality, pointing us to that end for which we were born. For the paradox of death is that it is the end of our life, and also its beginning. Death ends our earthly life, but only by laying that life aside can we taste that perfect life in which we enter fully into the presence of God. We have lost this sense of it in our culture, remembering only the loss. We tend to see death as the enemy, a thing to be greatly feared. We have shunted it out of our lives, placed the elderly members of our society into residences where they do not serve as daily reminders of our own inevitable fate, turned over the work of caring for the dying to professionals, the work of preparing bodies for burial to funeral directors. So fearful have we become of our own mortality that often, when a parent dies and leaves behind young children, the children are prevented from attending the funeral of their own father or mother. And yet, death is part of who we are; it is our natural fulfillment as well as our end, our healing as well as our destruction.

The early church celebrated the deaths of the martyrs as their “birthdays,” the days on which they were born to eternal life. One early theologian even taught that it was a gift: as long as we live, we cannot escape harming one another, but in dying we enter a new life which allows us the freedom to do no wrong, to do no harm. As long as we live, we see God “as through a mirror, darkly,” but then, “we shall see with perfect understanding, even as we, ourselves, have been perfectly understood.” (I Cor 13: 12) Death is the “desolate valley” which reveals itself as a “place of springs”. (Ps 84:5)

This is a hard truth to grasp. The poet John Donne, who was also Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, wrote:

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore ;
But swear by Thyself, that at my death Thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore ;
And having done that, Thou hast done ;
I fear no more.

We all taste that fear, but I will tell you: I have prayed by the beds of many dying women and men, and the last thing on their face is often joy. The death the magi bring to Christ is not only his own: it is our death, too, by which we hope to see the living face of God.

Three kings, three gifts, three responses to the birth of Christ. Left to itself, each gift would have been incomplete; together, they offer the fullness of our humanity to the God who has taken on our flesh. They show us that unity does not have to be uniformity. If one mage had brought all three, that would have suggested to us that there was only one acceptable path to God. But the image we have been given is one of multiplicity: three magi, four gospels, a thousand thousand men, women, and children laying themselves at the feet of their savior, coming in hope, seizing their dreams, offering up what they are for blessing, for grace, for endurance on the long road home, which will lead them, by blessed paradox, back to the beloved face they first saw in the manger, the face which has lived in and lured their hearts on all the long road that unites home and glory. Amen.