

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Today we celebrate the second great manifestation of God in our midst; the Feast of the Epiphany. The word 'epiphany' comes from Greek and it means a 'showing' or 'manifestation'. We have already celebrated the first manifestation on December 25, when God manifested himself to us in the form of a helpless, new-born baby.

This morning I would like to focus on two areas of the story of the wise men in the reading from Matthew's Gospel. First of all we'll look at the different reactions to Jesus' birth from the movers and shakers of the time. Then, secondly, we will think about the gifts which the wise men brought to Jesus as they paid homage to him and what they might signify.

No sooner was Jesus born than we see men forming different groups with very different reactions to this helpless babe.

First there was the reaction of Herod, a reaction of hatred and hostility. Herod was afraid that this small child was going to interfere with his life, his place, his power, his influence, and therefore his first instinct was to destroy him.

Are we any different today? When we seek to do only what we like rather than following Christ and allowing him to be at the centre of our lives, then we too are guilty of destroying him. A Christian is someone who has stopped doing what they like, dedicating their lives to Christ and seeking his will rather than their own.

Then there was the reaction of the chief priests and scribes, a reaction of complete indifference. The religious leaders of his own people, experts in the scriptures, although clearly aware of where the Messiah would be born, made no effort whatever to investigate. Yet Bethlehem was "just down the road", so to speak, from Jerusalem. But it didn't make the slightest difference to them. They were so engrossed in their Temple ritual and their legal discussions that they completely disregarded Jesus. He meant nothing to them.

Are we any different today? There are still many who are so interested in their own affairs that Jesus means nothing to them. How much of our time and energy are we prepared to give to come closer to God, to fully become the people that God has made us to be and to lead others to Christ?

Lastly there was the reaction of the wise men, a reaction of adoring worship, the desire to lay at the feet of Jesus Christ the noblest gifts which they could bring. We shouldn't necessarily think that the story of the coming of the Magi to the cradle of Christ is only a lovely legend. It is exactly the kind of thing that could have happened in the ancient world. When Jesus was born the world was in a state of eager expectation. Men were waiting for God and the desire for God was in their hearts. They had discovered that they could not build the golden age without God. It was to a waiting world that Jesus came; and, when he came, the ends of the earth were gathered at his cradle.

Surely, when we fully appreciate the love of God in Jesus Christ, we, too like the wise men, should be lost in wonder, love and praise.

So the wise men found their way to Bethlehem and as part of their homage to the future King of the Jews they offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts seem inspired by Isaiah 60:6 quoted in today's first reading, "they shall bring gold and incense;"

William Barclay tells us that from the earliest of times men have seen a peculiar appropriateness in the gifts the wise men brought. Seeing in each gift something which specially matched some characteristic of Jesus and his work.

In later tradition, the gold came to symbolise the kingship of Christ, so gold is the gift for a king. Seneca tells us that in Parthia it was the custom that no one could ever approach the king without a gift. And gold, the king of metals, is the gift fit for a king of men. Jesus was "the Man born to be King." But he was to reign, not by force like Herod, but by love; and he was to rule over men's hearts, not from a throne, but from a Cross.

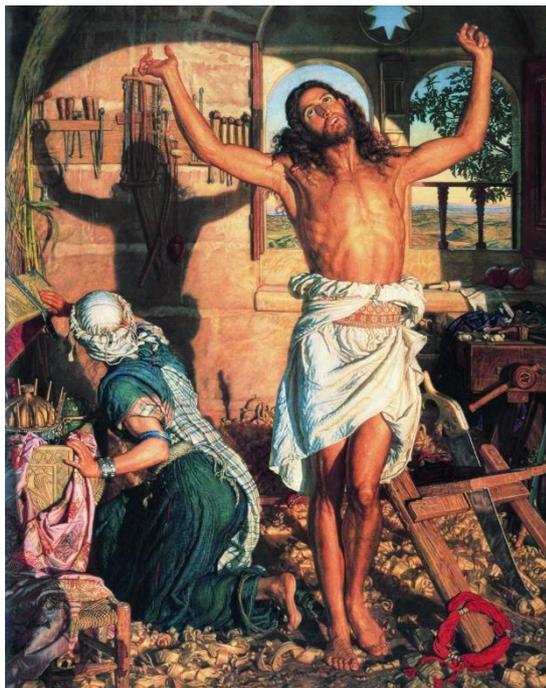
We do well to remember that Jesus Christ is King; for we can never meet Jesus on equal terms. We must always meet him on terms of complete submission. Before we can build our personal relationship with Christ, we must submit to his will.

The incense denotes his divine nature. Frankincense is the gift for a priest. It was in the Temple worship and at the Temple sacrifices that the sweet perfume of frankincense was used. The role of a priest is to open the way to God for men. The Latin word for priest is pontifex, meaning a bridge-builder. The priest is the man who builds a bridge between men and God. That is what Jesus did. He opened the way to God; he made it possible for men to enter into the very presence of God.

The myrrh symbolises his redemptive suffering and death. Myrrh, then, is the gift for one who is to die. Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead.

Jesus came into the world to die. I hope you have all been given a small picture of the famous Holman Hunt painting of Jesus, "The Shadow of Death". It shows Jesus at the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. He is still only a boy and has come to the door to stretch his limbs which have grown cramped over the bench. He stands there in the doorway with arms outstretched, and behind him, on the wall, the setting sun throws his shadow, and it is the shadow of a cross. Jesus came into the world to live for men, and, in the end, to die for men.

Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for one who was to die--these were the gifts of the wise men, Even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the supreme Saviour of men. These gifts have also come to signify virtue, prayer and suffering.



I pray that you will keep the small Holman Hunt picture and perhaps use it to reflect on two questions.

Which group do I align with in my reaction to the Christ-child and his call on my life? Those like Herod, the chief priest and the scribes or the wise men?

How should the fact that Jesus came into the world to die for us, shape our lives and how will we answer his call in the year ahead? In Jesus' name. Amen.