

## Homily Epiphany 2018

My family does not engage in a lot of gift giving at Christmas. However, the last several years we have each brought one gift of fairly moderate value to a family that would be exchanged through a game which would include moving gifts from right to left, and allowing one to steal someone else's gift. I participated in two other similar activities this season. In one I received a useful gift similar to what I had brought. In the family event I ended up with the gift I brought, which was OK. In a gathering with some priests for the second year in a row I ended up with a gift brought by a priest who didn't follow the rules. The rule was to bring one gift we had received from a parishioner. I dutifully brought something I would have gladly kept. The other priest brought something from a family gift exchange, but I think these gifts were intended more for humor, rather than practical value. No one stole my gift from me. So I am not sure what I will do with it. It may end up on the shelf of a thrift store.

Gifts play an important part in today's celebration of the epiphany. The magi, or wise men or kings from the east each brought gifts for Jesus as the newborn king of the Jews. They were led to seek out the king because of a bright star. Theologically, while the new born king was to be king of the Jews, the magi represent all the non-Jewish people for whom this future king came to be king as well. Their presence after the birth of Jesus was a reminder of a lesson that the Jewish people of Jesus time should have been aware. That was the message relayed in our first reading. Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, symbolized all of God's chosen people. Jerusalem was to be a light that would enlighten the whole world in order to draw all people to become part of the people of their God. It was to be a new people that would be gathered into a new covenant between God and His people. It was the covenant that Jesus in His maturity and mission would establish. And the light that was to shine through all of God's people was symbolized by the special star that helped three people from distant lands to discover the new born king and Messiah.

In our second reading St. Paul noted his special call to move beyond his Jewish brothers and sisters and bring the gentiles to Jesus.

In our popular imagery of the visitors from the east gathered at the rustic birthplace of Jesus the nature of the gifts seems out of place. While gold, frankincense and myrrh might be meaningful gifts for someone living in a royal setting, at first glance they are not real practical for the family of a carpenter from Nazareth. Nevertheless, they were the kind of gift one might bring for a child destined to be a king. All the

more, our Catholic tradition attaches specific symbolism to the gifts. It is symbolism expressed in the popular carol We Three Kings.

The gold symbolized the royalty of Jesus Christ, He was to be the King of the universe. He was to be a king for all people and for all time. At the heart of Jesus' ministry was the preaching and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. It is the kingdom made present in the Church and destined to be for all eternity in heaven. Frankincense was a tool for worship. It pointed to the priestly role of Jesus who would offer the most profound worship of His obedience to the Father which would result in the great sacrifice of salvation. It was also a sign of His divinity which makes Him the object of worship as well. Myrrh was associated with the rituals of death. While Jesus was on the cross, it was wine mixed with myrrh that was given to quench His thirst. Myrrh was used to anoint His body and prepare it for burial. The gift of myrrh anticipated His future sacrificial death on the cross.

In reviewing the meaning of the gifts of the magi we should think of our daily walk with Jesus Christ as a continuing gift exchange. We, following the example of the magi and understanding the meaning of their gifts should daily offer Jesus our God, with the Father and the Spirit gold, frankincense and myrrh. We should present to Jesus our gold acts of obedience to all that He taught in each of our daily choices to do good and avoid evil. We show that He really is our king. We offer Him the frankincense of our personal prayer and our gathering each week for Sunday Mass. We offer Him the myrrh of our sorrow for the sins for which He died to save us, even as we offer our resolution to turn away from sin in future choices. And the power and beauty of our offering of such gifts is that we are gifted in the process. Each effort of our reaching out to give our gifts to Jesus opens us to an even greater outpouring of the grace, the share in the divine, the Holy Spirit that He came into the world to bring us.

Our acts of obedience dispose to receive the grace that will help us to make more good choices. In prayer we give Jesus a chance to speak words of guidance and consolation. In our worship at Mass Jesus feeds us with His Body and Blood. When we express sorrow for our sins we are forgiven of those sins.

In the various Christmas gatherings in which I participated in the gift exchange, it wasn't just about the gift itself. The gift exchange exercise was an occasion of fellowship, humor, enlightenment and joy. A light amidst the Christmas celebration. Light is an important theme of the Epiphany. As God's new chosen people we are supposed to be light to those who

do not yet know Jesus. They should see the effect of our divine gift exchange with Jesus and they should want to join us.