

The Epiphany--St. Matthew 2:1-12  
January 13th, 2019 —St. George's Bolton  
Fr. Chris

## Gifts

Gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh for an infant child, said to be the King of the Jews, given by three men who have traveled from afar, following a star, to see this event.

While Christmass is a season of gift giving now, Epiphany has been a time for gift giving almost ever since these Biblical events, down to this day. Even still in Spanish cultures, gifts are exchanged with adults and presents are given to children, who often leave out their shoes to receive the gifts. Just last Sunday, a parade of three live camels and men dressed as the "Three Kings" traveled down Park Street in Hartford, as they do each year at this time, in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of Hartford. So many families celebrate it there, (Hartford is around 45% Hispanic) that Epiphany is even a school holiday.

These are special gifts for this young child. Gold obviously brings wealth, security and the possibility of purchasing things that you would otherwise not be able to afford. Gold also represents a special saving for unexpected needs in the future, such as the escape to Egypt that the Holy Family would endure. Gold has always been highly prized, even to our day. Gold symbolizes the same things to us, and the same images are conjured up in our minds when we hear the word. We think of riches, wealth, golden vessels, guilt on walls and furniture, in other words, extravagant signs of wealth. I think of the Breakers and the Marble House in Newport, with all their golden appointments.

Frankincense and Myrrh are less common today, but were both very prized and common in the first century. They both come from tree sap. Frankincense comes from the sap of a tree in India, and Myrrh from a tree in Northwestern Africa. These were refined in Arabia, where merchants processed many tons of the material in the first century when it was in the height of its demand. The fragrance was greatly desired from each. They would be mixed in oils which were used for cleaning the body and afterwards would leave the individual smelling with a nice fragrance. Egyptian women were noted to use the ashes of Frankincense as a base for eye-shadow. Many curative and healing properties were also ascribed to them, and even in our own time, are used in modern pharmaceuticals for treating everything from breathing disorders to ulcers. They would have been very common as prized gifts in the time of Jesus' birth. They were as much a gift of luxury and blessing to his family as they were to the infant they came to see.

Incense has a spiritual dimension to its symbolism here. From ancient times it has been used in meditation and worship. (I am not suggesting we use it here) and is said to represent the prayers of the faithful rising up to God. In the 1960s it was repopularized in incense sticks and cones sometimes used to hide or cover the odor of cannabis, but many times it was also used for its meditative qualities on its own. The gift of incense here is a spiritual one, and through the centuries has represented the response of the faithful sending their prayers to God, who will now walk among us.

Myrrh in this context symbolizes a fragrant ointment that would appear in several contexts in the Gospels. First there was the costly nard with which the woman anointed the feet of Jesus, shortly before his betrayal and crucifixion. Then it symbolizes the ministry of healing which Jesus would perform throughout his public ministry. Last of all, it represents the costly oils and probably myrrh with which his body would have been anointed when it was prepared for burial and laid in the tomb, or which the three women brought with them to anoint his body on Easter morning. Myrrh is a powerful image for all these events. While a common item used to anoint, it was a costly one, likely beyond the reach of this poor carpenter's family.

But I also think of my own gift of gold, that is reminding me that I am a wealthy man, blessed with many gifts in this life. I have everything I want and need. I live in the shelter of my dreams. I have plenty of food on my table and am even blessed to eat out several times a week. I have all the clothing I need and desire. I have a vehicle which is by far the nicest one of the many I have ever had, and I even have a teardrop trailer to go exploring with. And I have so much more than just these things: I have jobs that I enjoy. I have my health and the ability to see and hear and walk. And most of all, I have wonderful people and friends in my life who love and care for me. I have been gifted with kindness, compassion and companionship. I am truly blessed, and this is my epiphany, my moment of seeing the truth and blessings of my life.

It is so easy to think about what things you don't have. I know, I have been trained to do so by advertising much of my life. God has also gifted me with the insight into the many gifts I have been given by God. It is better to be grateful than ungrateful. My Epiphany is the manifestation of this insight in my life. How about you? What did you get for Christmas this year? Was it what you wanted? How gifted are you? What gifts are laid out before you to appreciate this Epiphany Season? AMEN