

The Meaning of Gifts

Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2008

I.

Christmas has come and gone, and today on the Gulf Coast, we mark the beginning of another important season. Carnival and Mardi Gras! We all know that celebrated season starts today and continues through Fat Tuesday on February 5. Christmas lights and Christmas parties just seem to evolve into Mardi Gras lights and Mardi Gras parties without the slightest interruption.

Now, although I appreciate this local tradition, I want to call your attention to the cover of today's service bulletin. We see that today also is the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it begins the church's parallel season of Epiphany that continues right up to Shrove Tuesday, which also is on February 5.

And to distinguish the two, the word "Shrove" in Shrove Tuesday comes from an old English word meaning "to confess one's sins." That same idea probably will not characterize Carnival.

But, perhaps the two seasons go together. The other name for the Feast of Epiphany is the Manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. And in early first century Palestine the term "Gentiles" described pagans. So, because one of the purposes of Epiphany was to offer God's blessings to the pagan world, some people might cynically say it is similarly useful for Carnival.

Be that as it may, let's begin with some things that sometimes blend into each other during Christmas and Epiphany. A close reading of the Nativity stories might raise questions. You might, for example, wonder when the three wise men first came to the baby Jesus. Their visit often is combined with the narratives of Jesus' birth, and these two events frequently find their way onto Christmas cards, calendars, and other depictions of the Nativity as one story. Indeed, the script for our Christmas play last month included both as part of one event.

However, we are not sure if the wise men visited the baby Jesus in the manger the night he was born, or if they did so later. The shepherds were there at his birth, but some scholars suggest that the wise men paid homage to Jesus at home where Joseph and Mary lived, perhaps months later. The fact that we recognize the wise men twelve days after Christmas day might be more traditional than historical, and this tradition lends itself to combining the two events. And that's fine, either way. The entire story is a single unit anyway.

Also, you might have noted that the Bible does not specifically say the wise men were kings, or that there were three of them. That understanding arose from the fact that there were three gifts, and also from the old nineteenth century carol we sang a few minutes ago that identified three kings. Again, however, it makes little theological difference either way. The point is that they, as Gentiles, honored Jesus.

Finally, a close reading shows that the story Jesus' birth does not mention the star of Bethlehem. The only heavenly displays described at this time were the Glory of God surrounding the angel who announced his birth to the shepherds, and the multitude of the heavenly host that also appeared in the skies. The star might have been there that night, or it might have appeared later to lead the wise men if they came later. Either way, however, it was a supernatural star.

II.

So, moving on, what does the word "epiphany" mean? Generally, it can describe a flash of intuitive understanding, the dawning of an insight concerning an existing reality that previously had not been apparent. Today's readings make its meaning evident in how the church understands the Epiphany of our Lord as a moment of truth for Gentiles as well as Jews.

The reading from Isaiah prophetically foretold the coming of Jesus Christ as the light, and said that nations and peoples would gather to him bringing gifts of gold and frankincense. The Psalm anticipated Christ's coming and proclaimed that kings from all nations would bow down before him as he defended all those in need and distress. The reading from Ephesians made clear the important point that Gentiles share in the promise of Christ through the Gospel.

And the Gospel, by using non-Jewish wise men from the East as central characters and the Star of Bethlehem as a central image, reaffirmed the idea that Christ came to be a light to all nations and all peoples, both Gentile and Jew.

III.

Let's explore this Gospel reading a little more deeply. But first, for clarification, you should know that two King Herods were involved with Jesus. It was not just one king with a long life span. The first, Herod the Great, was in today's reading when Jesus was born and he died a few years later. His son, Herod Antipas, ruled during the time of Pontius Pilate and was king at the death of Jesus. You will hear about the second Herod during Holy Week.

Back to the story. It's quite remarkable because King Herod the Great was known as a cruel and vicious tyrant, and ruled over a land with a heavily Jewish population. And then, believe it or not, these three complete strangers appeared unannounced and told Herod that they wanted to pay homage, not to him, but to somebody else they described as "King of the Jews."

Where did these guys get the title, "wise men?" They were fortunate that Herod didn't lock them up on the spot. They were fortunate that Herod wanted them to find out where Jesus was by using the pretext that Herod could pay homage himself, when he really wanted the information so he could have Jesus killed. And they apparently even believed Herod about that because God had to warn them later in a dream about Herod's plans, and they went home by another way.

But the important parts of the story are to their credit. They recognized that the birth of Jesus was significant, and they came to honor him and bring gifts. And, as I said earlier, they were Gentiles. This compares with the chief priests and scribes, who were the religious Jews familiar with biblical prophecies of the Messiah, and who one would think could have made the short trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to do what the wise men actually did.

So, it becomes clear that the story foretold the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders, and his acceptance by Gentiles. It also foretold the conflict that began during Jesus' life and continues to this day between the kingdom of God and those who would be kings on earth.

Two other things are important in the reading. The first is the Star of Bethlehem, irrespective of whether it appeared when Jesus was born, or later. The star moved ahead of the wise men and stopped over the place where Jesus was. Some astronomers have tried to explain this as the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which occurred around that time. Others speculate that it was a supernova. If there had been tabloids in those days, someone probably would have said it was a UFO.

For me, if you accept the miracle of Jesus' birth and his divine nature, it's easy to accept the idea of a supernatural star. God simply was using physical means to accomplish spiritual purposes. God again was at work in the world. There are other examples in the Bible. Recall the burning bush, or the parting of the Red Sea, or God's voice from the clouds at Jesus' baptism and the Transfiguration.

The second important thing in the reading is the thought and insight that went into the gifts the wise men brought. Normally, if we bring a gift to a baby today it would be a toy, or baby clothes, or something of that nature. Presumably there also were traditions in those days

about appropriate baby gifts as well. And I don't think they included things such as gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Those were valuable things; gifts for royalty. Instead of receiving gifts that normally would have been given to celebrate the birth of a child, Jesus received gifts usually given to priests, kings, and others of high rank. That's because he was born a king, died as a king, and will return as a king. And the wise men knew, without even having to be told, that their gifts should be special.

IV.

Even though I wondered earlier if these men were very wise in walking up to Herod and telling him they wanted to pay homage to somebody else, they do stand as examples of committed discipleship.

When they started out on their journey they didn't know where they were going. While they were on the way they must have been uncertain about what they were going to find. And after they got there they probably were not sure about the real meaning of what was in front of them. After all, even Jesus' disciples did not fully understand who he was after seeing him perform miracles years after the wise men. Certainly the wise men were at a greater disadvantage.

And they brought gifts befitting the occasion. They did not hold back. They were unselfish and generous, and did not worry about hanging on to their material goods. We don't know what eventually happened to these wise men; they are not mentioned again in the Bible. But we can be confident they were blessed and that their lives were enriched by what they did.

Thinking about the wise men's gifts reminds me of an old story that could apply to us today. It's about a farmer who was walking down the road with a sack of wheat. Coming the other way he saw the king's carriage being drawn by four magnificent horses. As they passed, the king stopped and asked the farmer what was in the bag, and the farmer replied that it was wheat from his farm.

The king asked the farmer if he could have some of his wheat. Well, this wheat was precious to the farmer and he didn't want to give it up, but he didn't want to deny the king either. So he reached into his bag, took out five grains, and gave them to the king. The king thanked him, and then the king reached into a large bag on the floor of his carriage, pulled out five gold coins, gave them to the farmer, and drove away.

As the farmer watched the king disappear into the distance, he wondered to himself, "what would have happened if I had given him the entire bag"?

V.

Well, we know more today than the wise men did then. With only the light of a star they came to honor Jesus, and they did not fully understand why Jesus was born. But we know with the light of centuries that Jesus' birth was God's revelation of salvation to the whole world. And we are called to respond to that most wondrous of all examples of God's grace.

The wise men are a model for us in that respect. With virtually nothing to go on they ventured forth in faith and brought gifts truly appropriate for a king. We, however, are in a better position. We have the same opportunity as the old wheat farmer who encountered the king's carriage. We know that if we give Jesus the entire bag, which really means giving him our entire lives, we will be blessed in return. *Amen.*