

## St. Edmunds - Epiphany Talk - 2nd January 2022

Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12



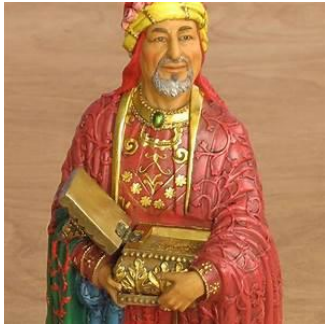
In the Name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

Gifts at this time of year can be hard work. It may well be easier to get a gift for someone you don't know so well than someone close to you. For example, you can take a risk on someone saying they have a passing interest in collecting handmade owls and track some down. But when your nearest and dearest has got an award winning collection of railway dvds, and indeed twentieth century films, it takes a certain amount of bravery to risk finding one that they have not got. Not many people risked buying me a book for my birthday - as one friend said you have everything that's ever published - but one risked a beautiful set of folio crime stories that I certainly hadn't got, while others popped a book token in the post...which helped with the addiction.

Having several children to buy for was not easy - mountains of gifts that took ages to sort out, obviously the ones that Father Christmas didn't bring. I read of a woman who was one of seven children whose parents took the view that each child would get three presents; something they wanted and had asked for - like a special toy, something they needed like a bedside lamp or a watch, and something fun - like a game or a book. I can't even manage that sort of discipline with adult children and find myself continually levelling what each get, and refusing offers to top up funds for a particular present when his sister got a more expensive item.



Which I suppose brings me onto the three most famous gifts that ever appeared at this time of the year, or maybe a bit later when Jesus was more of a toddler than a newborn. The fact that there are three gifts gives us the inescapable idea that there were indeed three wise men or kings. Matthew only refers to “wise men”, not a definite number of them - there may have been three, certainly at least two, or a whole gang of them. As for the gifts themselves - well years ago I was given a plaque which suggested that if they had been wise women they would have taken more sensible gifts like casseroles, nappies and cleaned up the stable. I couldn't possibly comment, but certainly the gifts have excited much learned comment over the years.



Gold. In some ways the most practical of gifts, especially if it could be converted into payment for an escape into Egypt which proved to be very necessary. In one church I was doing a family service at Epiphany I was loaned a set of three items for the gifts to show by a lady in the congregation who had brought them back from her travels. Except that the gold was some of her jewellery. I almost felt I ought to have a security guard watching over me for the duration of the service. Gold of course symbolised the royalty of Jesus; then as now gold was limited to those who could afford it.



When given some frankincense to play with, I was told to try and light some of it - it is a sort of incense after all. Either the lot I had was damp or too antique, but it would not light for everyone's education and edification. Or maybe I'm too low church for fiddling with such things. At least it could be kept for the following year's service completely intact. To be serious, it would have symbolised Jesus' divinity, his holiness, just as today incense is still used in some churches.



Myrrh looks very much like frankincense in some ways, it is a resin which can be ground down. It was used in medicine, and if used correctly could be a pain killer, and has been used for many purposes through the ages. Not that I recommend you trying it, she said hastily. It is mentioned several times in the Old Testament, including in merchants' stock, and in Moses' possession. Famously in the New Testament it reappears at the crucifixion, being offered as part of a mixture for Jesus to drink on the cross, and as part of the burial herbs and spices. There are traditions that Mary kept the Myrrh until the time it was needed. It is said that it symbolises Jesus' humanity, a useful and expensive item for many occasions.



Of course it is said that the real gift that came at Christmas is Jesus himself, the good news of a new start. I recently saw a mediaeval picture (though Peter can only find a cartoon), a picture of the figure of Eve gently touching the pregnant Mary, acknowledging that this baby, this Jesus, would symbolise a new start, an overcoming of old mistakes, of a new beginning. Obviously that creates lots of questions, but it does speak of an attempt to understand how Eve and Mary were linked as symbols of new beginnings.



Paul in his letter to the Ephesians specifically mentions the “gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power”. He was at the time, he says, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, a person changed forever by the love of God through Jesus. And perhaps that is what real gifts are meant to do, change lives, enhance lives, make the person grateful for what they have been given. Perhaps we can think of gifts that we have been given - perhaps not “the hideous tie so kindly meant” as John Betjeman mentioned in the 1950s - but the thoughtful gift that was saved up for, meant a special thing for the giver, sticks in our mind. Maybe it was something we really wanted as a child, or took us by surprise as an adult.

We are often given gifts. Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, just completely out of the blue. And they can mean different things at different times, depending on circumstances. The gifts in the Christmas story have been memorable over the centuries - and as Paul says, the greatest gift is the love of God through Jesus, a life changing, meaningful gift for all of us. Amen.