

## Gifts for the King

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#), [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Today's gospel is very familiar to many of us. We have heard of the arrival of the three wise men for some time. Even if you haven't, it is hard to pass a nativity scene without seeing these characters as part of the picture. Many times when we talk about the wise men, we talk about their long journey, or their encounter with Herod, or the way they followed the bright star to Bethlehem. Today I would like to focus on the gifts brought to Jesus by these wise men.

First, we are not sure there were three wise men. The Bible never tells us if there were truly three guys – we assume there were three because there were three gifts presented. All we know is they traveled a great distance following a sign of a star placed above Bethlehem. But let us focus on the gifts brought by these outsiders – gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The gift of gold seems an obvious one from our perspective. Gold is rare, it is valuable, it is a precious metal. Gold had long been a symbol of status and wealth among Kings in particular. Consider Solomon's temple and the pieces created from gold to be included for worship. Kings of all nations would often use gold for thrones or candlesticks – even as adornments to represent wealth and status. But let us take a closer look at gold. Gold is highly durable. It can withstand many natural acids and even fire. Gold is procured from the earth – dug out of the ground and refined. Gold is adaptable – it can be shaped to meet any specific need, or it can be combined with other metals to increase its strength. Let us not forget also that gold is beautiful – even metals that are used for other purposes are often colored to match gold because of its innate beauty. Gold can also withstand fire. In fact, it seems to emerge even more beautiful and complete after a time of firing. When

we look at the qualities of gold, we can imagine those qualities in a person as being truly valuable – durability, adaptability, beauty, strength; not to mention being capable of enduring fire. Gold seems to be a most appropriate gift for our King.

The second gift presented was frankincense. Many of us know frankincense is an incense or spice. It is actually a fragrant gum which is distilled from a tree found in Persia, India and Arabia. It is a white resin that is harvested when the tree is pierced and the gum is allowed to flow out. Once it hardens, it is sold as a hard resin which is very fragrant when burned. It is thought that this is the fragrance Aaron used in the temple for daily worship to God. Instructions were given in both Exodus and Leviticus for the use of fragrant incense in order to be a pleasing offering to God. So frankincense was used for worship. Our wise men came to worship the Messiah, and therefore

brought the appropriate element to do just that. So frankincense, like our praise and worship, was presented to Jesus as an item pleasing to the Messiah. We too must worship the Messiah with our acts of praise and thanksgiving. God presented God's most precious gift to us, and we in turn are to present our gifts of praise and thanksgiving to God. Frankincense represents worship – a truly appropriate gift to present to the King.

Finally, we get to the third gift – myrrh. This appears to be an odd one. Myrrh is an aromatic gum produced from a thorn-bush that grew in Arabia and Ethiopia. It is harvested similar to frankincense – the tree is cut and the gum is drained and allowed to harden. Myrrh was used for many things in the ancient world, but the most common was for embalming after burial. Myrrh represents bitterness – persecution for the sake of others. Myrrh appears to be presented to represent the human suffering that

Jesus would take on as being a part of our world. So with myrrh we get the complete package of gifts – gold to represent endurance, beauty, and stature; frankincense to represent worship and praise; and myrrh to represent difficulties and suffering for the sake of God.

Many of us would probably prefer the story to end with the gold and frankincense. We want to see our Christian walk as an easy stroll filled with beauty and blessings not matched on earth. That part is true. We must also consider the 3<sup>rd</sup> gift – myrrh. The symbol presented tells us things will not always be easy – we will not be given an escape from all trials and difficulties. We may have to endure some refiner's fire. Once again, however, we know the end of the story. As the song says, 'There is victory in Jesus, my savior forever.' Our lives will be depicted with peaks and valleys – times when things are going

well and times when we must face serious challenges. Some of you have heard the story behind one of the greatest loved Christian songs ever written, Amazing Grace. The following was printed in the July-August 1996 edition of “Away Here in Texas.”

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...” So begins one of the most beloved hymns of all times. The author of the words was John Newton, the self-proclaimed wretch who once was lost but then was found, saved by amazing grace.

Newton was born in London July 24, 1725, the son of a commander of a merchant ship which sailed the Mediterranean. When John was eleven, he went to sea with his father and made six voyages with him before the elder Newton retired. In 1744 John was impressed into service on a man-of-war, the H.M.S. Harwich. Finding conditions on board intolerable, he deserted

but was soon recaptured and publicly flogged and demoted from midshipman to common seaman.

Finally at his own request he was exchanged into service on a slave ship, which took him to the coast of Sierra Leone. He then became the servant of a slave trader and was brutally abused.

Early in 1748 he was rescued by a sea captain who had known John's father. John Newton ultimately became captain of his own ship, one which plied the slave trade.

Although he had had some early religious instruction from his mother, who had died when he was a child, he had long since given up any religious convictions. However, on a homeward voyage, while he was attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm, he experienced what he was to refer to later as his "great deliverance." He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed,

“Lord, have mercy upon us.” Later in his cabin he reflected on what he had said and began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm and that grace had begun to work for him.

For the rest of his life he observed the anniversary of May 10, 1748 as the day of his conversion, a day of humiliation in which he subjected his will to a higher power. “Thro’ many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; ’tis grace has bro’t me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

And so through the gifts presented to the baby Jesus, we can see a forethought of things to come. We will have times of great joy and times of suffering, yet as Newton says in his song, “and grace will lead me home.” Amen.