

The Gifts of the Magi: 2008 Christmas Eve Homily

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As the story goes, a bright star in the sky sent a signal to far-distant lands the night that Jesus was born, a signal that a new King was born. In those days, it was traditional for nations to send emissaries bearing gifts to a new ruler, and this case was no different.

Traveling far from lands to the East, three wise men sought the baby who would have the stature of a King in time. They came bearing gifts of great value: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

To some, these gifts form the basis of the generosity of the Christmas season. We give gifts to one another, it is often said, because of these precious gifts given to the newborn Jesus in the manger.

Santa Claus, then, is the ultimate wise man—he knows whether every child is bad or good, and he brings gifts to all of the good children, honoring them as the baby Jesus was honored at his birth.

To others, this story the first known example of overly-lavish and inappropriate Christmas gifts, ones I'm quite sure it was impossible for this peasant family to "re-gift." Frankincense and myrrh, you see, are aromatic resins used in perfumes and burned in religious rituals, myrrh most notably being used in preparing the dead for funerals and in the preparation of holy oil with which to anoint a holy person.

And who gives gold to a baby? Seriously.

But there's a fourth gift in this story, and I think it's the most interesting one.

Today, I'm not so interested in gold, or frankincense or myrrh. Those are just things.

The magi who traveled from far-off lands gave another gift to the infant king that holy night—the gift of life itself, the gift of peace in the midst of struggle.

As we've just heard the story told from the Christian Gospel of Matthew, the wise men first went to King Herod to inquire about the newborn baby whom they had come to honor with gifts. According to the story, Herod knew that this baby would be a threat to his rule—a competing authority in the land.

Herod, having heard the prophecies, had been planning to kill the Christ child when he was born. And so Herod instructed the magi to return to him once they knew his whereabouts.

And yet they did not.

It is written in Matthew that "having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road" (Mat 2:12)

These wise men honored the baby Jesus with expensive gifts, and then risked their lives in defiance of King Herod so that the baby would live.

Had they returned to Herod with the infant's location, no amount of gold or expensive scents would have made this story the joyous one that it is. Herod surely would have found the baby, and the outcome would not have been pretty.

But they left by a different road, and in doing so, gave the ultimate gift to the baby Jesus on the occasion of his birth.

And in giving that gift, the magi from distant lands to the East provide a different sort of lesson this Christmas.

O. Henry, in his famous short story, writes of a destitute couple who each give up their most prized possession in order to buy their spouse a gift. And we know that each of those gifts were useless once their complement had been sold. A watch chain needs a watch; hair combs need long hair.

And yet James and Della, the couple in the story, had each other. They had pork chops for dinner and the knowledge that each would make a huge sacrifice for the other. We learn in this story that the wisest of people think not of themselves but of those whom they love, that the wisest gift-givers are willing to sacrifice the material goods that they treasure in order to honor someone important to them.

In this story, James and Della had very little to their name, and their material things—or lack thereof—were of no consequence in the end.

And neither are the gold, the frankincense, the myrrh, and the assortment of modern-day luxuries that Christmas has come to be associated with.

What is important in the original Christmas story is that these wise men refused to participate in the reign of a violent king. They refused to put the baby Jesus in harm's way because an Earthly power told them to. They risked their standing as emissaries of foreign governments because they had faith in the prophecies that this baby would bring peace to the Earth.

And today, things are not what is important either.

Today, we have the opportunity to give to one another gifts that no amount of money can buy, gifts more valuable than gold, more precious than all of the frankincense and myrrh we can find.

We have the opportunity to give one another hope.

We have the possibility to give one another peace.

We can give joy, forgiveness, friendship, and love.

We can be magi ourselves this Christmas, spreading the wisest gifts of them all throughout this community and our world.

May it be so.