

## **New Year, New Gifts - Us!**

6 January,

2019

Feast of the Epiphany

Reading: Matthew 12:1-12

Today we recall the arrival of mysterious visitors from the East to the Christ child. Sages who study the stars and bring really odd gifts. If you still have your nativity scene up today you can bring the wise men over to the baby.

One day suggested that if the wise men had been wise women they wouldn't have got lost as they would have read the map, they wouldn't have arrived late, and they would have brought practical gifts - a casserole maybe. But then, if they had been women, what would they have said on the way home? "That baby you know it didn't look much like Joseph."

"Yes and I've heard they aren't even married." "Did you see those awful sandals Mary had on?"

The Epiphany, as today is known, is important for lots of reasons. Matthew the Gospel writer's first chapter told of a Jewish king, born of Jewish descent to the promise of the Jewish scriptures. Coming at the end of the 12 days of Christmas Epiphany means showing or revealing and the astrologers from the East are the first non-Jews/gentiles to respond to the Messiah. So the epiphany is the revealing of Jesus to the whole world as our Messiah.

But what of those gifts. Gold, frankincense and myrrh, again Matthew is making a point. Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for burial. This child will be for us prophet, priest and king. This can all seem a bit far fetched but from the other end there is an Iranian tradition of astrologers following a planetary alignment between 7 and 5 BC.

But what of us? At this time of year it is traditional to make New Year's resolutions. They usually go something like this. I'm going to clean out the garage and lose 8kg and maybe visit Uncle Roger more often.

Of course we have all done that. At least we have tried. Often we just get frustrated. By Easter we have gained 10kg and haven't even visited the garage let alone Uncle Roger. But I think today's Gospel is asking something different of us.

It is asking us what gifts we bring to the infant Christ. Called to pay him homage what gift can we offer?

Carl Rogers, who is sometimes called the father of modern counselling, discovered a great truth: that we need to accept who we are. We do this when we begin to say, "I am enough. Who I am is enough before God and others. I'm not perfect but I am accepted and loved for who I am." He wrote "People are just as wonderful as sunsets if you let them be. When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, 'Soften the orange a bit on the right hand corner.' I don't try to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds." This is the basis of what is called the person-centred approach to counselling.

You see the problem with most New Year's resolutions, and indeed with modern society generally is that they start from the platform that I am not enough. I can only be happy when I am 8kg lighter or have a tidy garage or a great relationship with Uncle Roger. But God's gift to us at Christmas is that our humanity, our essential person-ness, is loved, is honoured, is enough before God.

A really strange and paradoxical thing happens when we understand that we are enough Carl Rogers (the son of a vicar) goes on to write. Then, he says, we can change, then we want to change, when we know we are

loved and cared for as we are. We are after all human beings not human doings.

So the gift we can bring to the infant Jesus is not strange stuff from the Orient. It is not this task or that. It is not a million things we might do for him, albeit very worthy. What gift can we give that no one else can? What gift can we bring to him who, as the psalm says, already owns the cattle on a thousand hills? What gift can you bring that is yours alone to give? The gift that you can bring as we kneel before him is you! Loved, accepted you! A million times this child will grow and show that we need never be afraid. God is with us.

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb writes Christina Rossetti in her poem set to music. If I were a wise man I would do my part but poor as I am I give him my heart.

When we give our love to the Christ child it's then that everything else begins to make sense. The giving of ourselves to God, the abandonment of ourselves to God goes by another name. We call it prayer. Following the tradition of St Ignatius I always begin my prayer time each day by doing just that. Bowing low I abandon myself as close as I can without reservation to God.

500 years ago Ignatius put it like this...

“The person who prays will benefit greatly by entering them with great spirit and generosity toward their Creator and LORD, AND BY OFFERING ALL THEIR DESIRES AND FREEDOM TO HIM SO THAT GOD’ S DIVINE MAJESTY CAN MAKE USE OF THEM AND ALL THEY POSSESS IN WHATSOEVER WAY IS IN ACCORD WITH GOD’ S MOST HOLY WILL.”

But how can an offering of ourselves make sense of our lives?

A salt doll journeyed for thousands of miles over land until it finally came to the sea. It was fascinated by this strange moving mass, quite unlike anything it had ever seen before.

"Who are you?" said the salt doll to the sea.

The sea smilingly replied, "Come in and see."

So the doll waded in. The farther it walked into the sea the more it dissolved, until there was only very little of it left. Before that last bit dissolved the doll exclaimed in wonder, "Now I know what I am!"

Giving the gift of ourselves to God is not a one off gift from Iran to Bethlehem but the journey of a lifetime. But it begins right now and every day of this new year.

Let us pray:

We thank you Loving God for this new year.

We thank you for the gift of life and that in you we are accepted as we are.

We don't need to do anything to earn your love. As we begin this year we want to give ourselves to you deeper and more fully than last year. Help

this year to be a journey of self acceptance and an offering of our lives to you. And then you, Jesus, will guide us by your love into lives of deeper meaning and greater joy,

now and forever.

Amen.