

## EPIPHANY 2010 Sermon

### Hereford Cathedral

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This is one of my favourite festivals, with the darkest blue of the starry sky, the mysterious and exotic Magi from the wondrous East, and the splendour of their rare and costly gifts. People's fascination down the ages has added new dimensions to the story, so that an unspecified number of wise men has become three kings, and the gifts they brought have been given defined meanings. It's a story that wants to draw us deeper into a sense of mystery – and in the Church it leads us all into a season of Epiphany when the wondrous tales of Christ's revealing to the world are celebrated: his baptism by John in the Jordan, and the first miracle at Cana. The theme of Epiphany is revelation.

All of these stories are rich in symbolism of all kinds, and a symbol is a symbol. We have to let it play upon us; we have to interact with it, see what response it evokes, how it resonates with our life and experience. The gifts that the magi bring are symbols, and perhaps we're a bit too quick and slick in saying what they represent. Gold 'for a king,' Frankincense 'for God,' and myrrh as a sign of suffering and death – these explanations only swept the board as the centuries rolled on – so that today they're presented as a kind of fact: 'This is what it is – he gets gold because he's a king, incense because he's God, and myrrh because he's going to die.'

But the bible tells the tale without comment, and we find that the early Christian thinkers had a rich variety of ideas; it was only later that it got stuck in the rut that 'We Three Kings' ground into us as children. So I ask you today to lay aside anything you thought you knew about this. The gifts are symbols in a symbolic story, and we mustn't limit what they signify with a single 'off the peg' explanation.

Instead, let's allow our imaginations to range around a bit. Perhaps, for instance, the gifts have something about them to do with the Trinity. After all, it's St Matthew's Gospel where we find this story, and Matthew sometimes uses the literary device of repeating a word or phrase or idea at the beginning and end of a passage to show that everything in between has been a unity. In the story of the visit of the Magi we have Jesus' very first appearance; people representing the wide world have come to him with three gifts. Now look to Jesus' very last appearance: standing on the (no doubt symbolic) Galilean mountain, he sends the disciples out into the world to baptize people everywhere 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. If we see the gold as a sign of God the Father, the creator, the pure source from which all things flow; and if we see the myrrh as a sign of God the Son, who embraces the pains and death of humanity, and comes to heal it; and if we see the incense as a sign of the Holy Spirit, pervading all things, blowing like wind where it wills – then we find that Jesus' first and last appearances in the gospel speak of the Trinity, and of engagement with all of humanity, and the whole Gospel has been comprehended between these identical poles.

And here's another suggestion: that these astrologers were laying down the substances used in their divinations, surrendering them to Christ; it isn't what they give, but what they *mean by the giving* that matters. They are surrendering their life's work, their system of belief, and their sacred tools, to the Lordship of Christ. Their divination had brought them to him in darkness and uncertainty; it had been a glimmer in the direction of truth. Now they see face to face, and having no need of divination any longer they present their tools in the worship of Christ.

Here's another take on it: St Bruno, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Italian Benedictine abbot (not to be confused with the patron saint of tobacco) saw gold, frankincense and myrrh as the offering of the purest of our wisdom, the discipline of our prayer, and the mortification of our lives. He said, 'Thus, we offer the Lord gold when we shine in his sight with the light of heavenly wisdom. We offer him frankincense when we

send up pure prayer before him, and myrrh when, mortifying our flesh with its vices and passions and by self-control, we carry the cross behind Jesus.'

The great Epiphany theme, as I said earlier, is revelation. The revealing or manifesting of Christ. What we see in him and find in him will be different for each of us, but if we approach with openness and humility we will be shown what it is that each needs to see and understand. We will recognize the good we yearn for in him. Early Christian thinkers spoke about Christ revealing afresh the true splendour and full dignity of what humanity was created to be; he is the perfect image made manifest, and in seeing him we begin to enter upon our own healing and transformation. Some of them believed that we have to see him, however dimly (and that 'seeing' perhaps means the having of a glimmer of understanding, an acknowledgment of the source of his goodness) before we can apply our wills to loving him. We must in some measure see before we know properly how to love.

The Magi might be an image of that for us. They have sought Christ and finally found him. Finding him, they have seen him; seeing him, they have loved him – and each in a different way, each with a different gift to leave at his feet. And we have sought him, and however imperfectly, had some sense of finding him. Finding him we have, in some way, seen him. Seeing him, we apply our wills to loving him. For one person, perhaps, the gift and use of money and resources in his name; for another, a life of sacrificial service to friend or stranger. One offers her mind and scholarship, another his artistry or craft, yet another the discipline of prayer and contemplation.

Gold, frankincense, myrrh – what are they? Their meanings are as many as there are people in this world; there is no limit to their meaning, nor any prescription. They are the frankincense, gold and myrrh appropriate to the hearts of all who see Christ, to all who are enlightened by his self-revelation.