

The Epiphany of Jesus: King and God and Sacrifice
Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, January 6, 2016
The feast of the Epiphany (Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)

Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV): *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I hope that your Christmas was full of joy! Gift giving has become such a huge part of Christmas for Americans. I'm told that for the church in the East (and traditionally for Latin Americans as well) that Epiphany is the occasion for gift giving. But for Americans, we crowd our trees with presents on Christmas Day. Some presents are useful—appliances or tools. Some presents are pretty, such as paintings or decorations, like tree ornaments that remind us of loved ones. Some presents are just plain fun—toys or games or perhaps the same odd gift trinket that is given from person to person each year.

Tonight we remember a different set of gifts. We remember gold, frankincense and Myrrh. These are special gifts—unique and precious. These are gifts that point to who Jesus is: King and God and Sacrifice.

Tonight is the feast of the Epiphany. When we use the word epiphany, we generally mean some moment of realization—that experience of having the light turned on in our heads when we see clearly what before was just a mystery. An epiphany is a moment of enlightenment, a revealing of new understanding that has a powerful impact. For Christians, the season of Epiphany is about the revealing of who Jesus is. Epiphany is about the enlightenment of the Gentiles and indeed the enlightenment of all people to the truth about Jesus Christ.

In Epiphany season we'll hear Gospel readings about this revelation, including the Baptism of our Lord, where God the Father speaks his approval of his son. We'll hear about Jesus' miracle at the wedding in Cana, and Jesus' first sermon. We'll hear about the transfiguration, where Peter, James and John see a vision of Jesus in radiant white, and hear God the Father speak again. These are some of the ways that Jesus revealed himself in the world as more than just another prophet.

We start tonight with the wise men and their gifts. It is amazing enough that God would call out to these wise men—they were probably Gentiles from the East. But the gifts they bring point to the revelation of who Jesus is: King and God and sacrifice.

Their first gift is Gold, fit for a king. Gold is a gift of riches and honor due to a king. The wise men asked Herod “where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” They sought a king and brought a gift fit for a king. So Jesus—this humble child in a stable—is a king. We talk about this from time to time, such as on the feast of Christ the King right before Advent. Often, we remark that Jesus is a different kind of king—humble and kind—one who gives himself for us and who loves us. This is indeed true; Jesus is a unique king. But he is a king.

In our culture, we get uncomfortable with authority. Americans don’t like kings very much. We are independent people. We don’t like to be under someone’s authority. So I think we are still uncomfortable with Jesus’ authority. If Jesus is king, that means he is in charge, and that we’re accountable to him. If Jesus is in charge, then he might ask us to make changes in our lives we don’t want to make, or develop in ways that require something from us. But this Epiphany is a revelation of the truth—that Jesus is indeed the king of the universe, the king in the kingdom of God, the one to whom we owe our allegiance and even obedience.

Jesus is the king who loves us, so we can surely trust him. But we must remember that Jesus is the king, the Lord, the one that we follow and obey. Jesus is King.

The second gift shows us another epiphany—the gift of Frankincense shows us that Jesus is God. Incense has been used by many cultures for centuries. Incense is dried tree resin. Incense gives off sweet smelling smoke when it is burned. Frankincense is a particular precious type of incense, more pure and pleasant than other kinds of incense. One purpose for incense is to provide a pleasing smell. But more importantly, incense is used as a form of prayer. The smoke rising to the heavens symbolizes our prayers lifting to heaven. Incense is a gift of prayer given to God.

Jesus is not simply an earthly king, Jesus is God, the creator of all that is, the one with the power over life and death, the God of all to whom all are accountable. This claim is a challenge to those who wish to domesticate Jesus, to make him a teacher among others. But if Jesus really is God, then Jesus reveals the truth of who God is. No more guesswork or arguing among religions to find the ideas that suit us. If Jesus is God, then we know the truth—the truth himself. Jesus is King and God.

The third gift of the wise men is Myrrh. Myrrh is a strange gift to give a baby, for it has more relevance to the end of life than the beginning of life. Myrrh is a precious and aromatic ointment, used for embalming bodies. Perhaps this Myrrh was among the ointments that the women brought to the tomb after Jesus was crucified, to anoint his body for burial.

Jesus, the King, the God of all that is, is also the one who loves us so much that he died for us. Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins so that we might be forgiven for turning away from our King and forgetting to acknowledge him as God. Jesus died and rose again so that we might be restored to relationship with God and given new life.

God's love for us comes first. God's love comes before we can acknowledge him as God or obey him as King. He gave himself for us, not because we've earned it, but because he loves us. Jesus gave his life for us because generous self-giving is part of the truth of who God is—part of the truth of who Jesus is as our king. To know this epiphany about Jesus—about God—is to receive the greatest gift of love and joy from him who is the lord of our spiritual lives and our material lives. Jesus is King and God and Sacrifice.

So what gifts do you have for Jesus? How do you respond to God's great gift to you? How are you following Jesus as your king? How do you acknowledge Jesus as God? Do you love the one who loves you enough to sacrifice himself for you?

May you know the epiphany of the truth of Jesus Christ and the blessing of the one who is King and God and Sacrifice.