

Solemnity fo the Epiphany: The Gifts We Bring



Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. It is not the conclusion of the Christmas Season, that comes next Sunday, but it is one of the most beautiful of the celebrations of the Christmas Season. The word Epiphany means a manifestation of the Lord. The Church sees three initial manifestations of his presence to the world: the visit of the magi, the Baptism of the Lord, and the Wedding Feast of Cana. Our Greek Orthodox neighbors consider all three manifestations in their one celebration of January 6th. In the Roman Catholic Church we divide these over the next week or so. Of all the celebrations of the Christmas season, the Epiphany with its visit of the three wise men has captured the imagination of many creative writers and deep thinkers.

I enjoy telling Henry Van Dyke's story of The Fourth Wise Man, O Henry's story of The Gift of the Magi, and G. K. Chesterton's story of the modern wise men. I had it in my mind for the last week or so that I wanted to focus on the gifts the wise men brought. This led me to finding an Epiphany story I had not heard before. I decided to rewrite it and share it with you today. The story as I'll tell it takes place a two hundred years ago in what at that time was the small rural Pennsylvanian town of Bethlehem. These were the days before steel turned Bethlehem PA into a thriving city.

In the Bethlehem of this story, there was a cottage of a hardworking but poor carpenter named Joseph, his wife Mary, and the child who was the center of their lives. Joseph's workshop was built onto the back of the cottage. The sawdust used to blow under the door of the kitchen, no matter how often Mary swept it. In the winter, Joseph was always busy with the chairs he made for a local firm. He was paid scandalously little for them. He did more than make chairs, though. He was both the town carpenter and the town handyman. When the scales in Mrs. Evans shop were broken, it was Joseph who fixed

them. It was Joseph who repaired door hinges and the table legs. It was Joseph who mended fences and farm wagons. It was Joseph who could put new handles on spades and hoes quicker than any other man in the neighborhood. The cottage used to resound with the hammering of the nails and the drone of the sawing. Mary had long ceased to notice it and the child now nine months had apparently grown as used to it as His mother. Life was as uneventful for them as for the rest of the people.

There was work. There were petty worries, like the smoking chimney that couldn't be cleaned because it cost money, or the speed with which Joseph's boots wore out. And, more ominous, the ever recurring fear that Mrs. Evans would suddenly refuse to give things on credit. And there was joy. There was their family. There was the child. While this life was going on, three wise men from various parts of the world had met on one of the hills that surrounded the little town and were now making their way there together. They were very different from each other. What they had in common was that they saw hope in a star that led them all to that hill, and to the little town. One of them was rich, judged by the world's standards. He had begun his journey in the comfort of a first-class compartment in the train out of Saint Louis.

He had traveled in luxury, in search of the child. The second had followed the star from the concert hall and the cathedral in Capetown, South Africa. He was a vocalist, actually the first native African vocalist to perform in South Africa. He had traveled carefully, frugally, with one eye anxiously on his money, for a growing reputation and wealth do not always go hand in hand. The third wise man was penniless. He had tramped and begged his way from his home in Asia, through Europe, and finally across the ocean to New York, and so to this town in the hills of Pennsylvania. When they met on that hill, the three wise men immediately recognized each other's hearts. They were all looking for the One who would bring hope to the world. They were looking for the One who would bring Truth to the world. They were looking for the King of Kings. They had each followed the star to the outskirts of Bethlehem. Now together they followed it into the town. Along the rough track, past a sprawling farm, over a bridge, past the first neat white cottages. They followed and looked around.

There was the general store, the post office, a small row of dilapidated hovels of houses, and a little apart, another smaller cottage. When they looked at the cottage and then looked up at the sky, they saw the star fade away. They would never see it again. They did not need to see it again. Here, then, was the king to be found. They walked up to the front door. Strangely enough, the door was not fastened. The poor man opened it gently and the others gazed in over his shoulders. It was an absurdly common place for the king they had traveled across the world to see. The woman was standing there, laughing with a baby who sat in a high chair. A blue plate rested on the tray of the chair, and she was feeding Him with a small spoon. As they entered, the woman looked up quickly, but without surprise; she must have been expecting them. The child stared, immediately forgetful of His dinner. His eyes followed Mary as she took the blue plate and laid it on the kitchen table. Then she quietly untied the bib from the child's neck, smoothed His hair, and left Him sitting in the high chair. She said not a single word to the wise men. She simply knelt before the chair. The men fell on their knees with her.

The rich man fumbled in his pocket and dragged out a large cloth sack of coins. "Lord," he said, "what I bring you is only what you have lent me--gold. But you made it, you put it in the earth for us; you allowed us to discover it. You have lent me so much, Lord--money and influence and power. You have let me use all the resources of the earth--timber, coal and oil, wheat, silver and iron. The gold that I give you speaks for all those things." As he spoke he emptied the bag on to the tray of the chair. Rare coins, gold and silver, from every land under heaven lay heaped there. Attracted by the glimmer of the gold, the child clasped His fingers round the largest coin and, laughing, dropped it on to the floor.

It rolled over the floor and hid itself under the dresser. The rich man put his hands over the coins and said to the child: "All these I give back to you, for they were yours in the beginning. My job is to see that they will be used in your honor." "Lord," cried the singer, unrolling his music, "my only gift is to praise you with the gifts you have given me." And his voice fell softly on the ears of Mary and the child. "Lift your hidden faces. Ye who wept and prayed; Leave your covert places, Ye who were afraid. Joyfully gather. Sorrow now is done. We have found a Father, We have found a Son." "You have given me gifts, Lord," he said, "and I bring them back to you; help me to use them; help me to increase them, for they are not things of my own. They are only lent me to use in your service." And as he spoke Mary saw all the praise that was meant for the child.

She also saw that which would never be used for Him, the talents that would be turned against Him--the music, the singing, the writing, the acting, the eloquence that would be abused by the godless. The third man had risen to his feet. He looked like a scarecrow; his clothes in rags, his feet gaping through the holes in his boots, his hair hanging over the collar of his threadbare coat. "Dear Lord," he said softly, I have nothing to give you, only poverty and suffering, and I've walked over half the world to give it to you. I don't come alone; I'm one of an army who send you the same gift.

I'm their ambassador," he said quietly, falling on his knees again and grasping the arm of the baby's chair in his hands. "I'm here for everyone who suffers, for the persecuted, for those in the broken cities, for those dying on the battlefields." He clasped his hands together; they were black and their nails broken. "It was wrong to say that I had nothing to give you. Take the poverty of the homeless and the starving; the agony and pain in all the hospitals in the world; take the suffering of the abandoned, the loneliness of the refugees; the anxiety and terror of those who have been torn from their families. Take the helplessness of parents caring for their chronically ill child.

Take the tiredness of the elderly wife caring for her dying husband. Take the tears of the man who just buried his wife. Take the sadness of those whose marriages fell apart, and the suffering of those who are alone in life. Accept them all," he prayed. And so the three wise men came with their gold,

frankincense and myrrh. And the child accepted everything they gave Him, the power, the praise and the suffering. His mother laid up their words in her heart. We also need to give the Lord gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is that which carries with it the promise of lasting wealth. “Invest in gold and don’t worry about the fluctuations of the market,” the advertisements tell us. What is it that we have that is our gold? What can we give Him that is permanent? It is our love. Love, true love, sacrificial love, never dies. When our bodies die, our love remains united to our spirits, united to the Source of our spirits and our love, God Himself. He gave us love and calls us to return it to Him.

We can do this by loving God in all his wonderful gifts, the gifts of nature, the gifts of family, the gifts of His Presence in others. Our lives can and must be love songs to our God. This is our gold. We can give the Lord frankincense. In the story this was the musician’s talent. How about our talents? We each have talents, talents that are unique. These are our reflections of the wonders of our God. Every one of us shares in some way the creativity of the Lord. This creativity was given to us to praise God. We need to give it back to him. Talents are not meant to be hoarded.

They are meant to praise God. This our frankincense. We can and need to give the Lord our myrrh. No one can escape suffering. It is the price of sin that all must pay, guilty and innocent. But for the follower of Christ all suffering has value when it is united to the suffering of the Lord. Our pains, sorrows, and even our deaths can become prayers for others, and ways of praising our King. It takes faith, tremendous faith, wonderful faith, to suffer with Christ for others. We can give Him this gift. We can give Him our myrrh. At Christmas we celebrate the greatest gift the world has ever received, the very presence of our God as one of us. This presence is manifested to the world at the Epiphany. Now, like the magi, we are called to bring gifts to our King: gold, frankincense and myrrh, our riches, our talents, and our pain. They are all His. They are His because we are His.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino, SJ