

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

The Rev'd Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priestⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson:

*The First Lesson to be read when Epiphany I does **not** fall on January 13:*

Here beginneth the sixtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah [**EE-fuh**], all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew [**SHOW**] forth the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar [**KEY-durr**] shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the LORD thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.”

The First Lesson to be read when Epiphany I falls on January 13:

Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the sixtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.^{iv}

“... And the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee: for in my wrath I smote thee, but in my favour have I had mercy on thee. Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night; that men may bring unto thee the forces of the Gentiles, and that their kings may be brought. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted. The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet; and they shall call thee, The city of the LORD, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel. Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through thee, I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations. Thou shalt also suck the milk of the Gentiles, and shalt suck the breast of kings: and thou shalt know that I the LORD am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob. For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron: I will also make thy officers peace, and thine exactors righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise. The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended. Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified. A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation: I the LORD will hasten it in his time.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.^v

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[T]hey offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”^{vi} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The symbolic value of these gifts is set out in the 19th century Epiphany hymn that we just sang: “We Three Kings”. Actually there is no reason to believe that these men were kings, or even that there were

three of them. They were astronomers and astrologers, which in those days was the same thing. They brought three gifts to the Christ child, which does not necessarily mean three givers, but the hymn does capture the significance of the gifts.

Gold is associated with royalty. Incense is associated with deity. Myrrh is associated with death because it was used in embalming. So the final stanza of the hymn designates Jesus as “King and God and Sacrifice.”

I would like to suggest to you that these three gifts represent what you and I should offer to Christ today. Let’s look at each of them.

We need to recognize that Jesus is king and His church is not a democracy. We do not determine what is true or what is right by taking a vote. The king speaks; we obey. That obedience is what Jesus wants from us.

But gold has a certain practical value as well as a symbolic value. Travel costs money and the Holy Family, which had already traveled from Galilee to Judea, was about to embark on another journey to Egypt. As a skilled craftsman, Joseph could no doubt find work, but I’m sure the gift of gold was very useful. It is useful today in honoring Jesus and carrying out the orders He gives to His disciples at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “Go and make disciples of all nations.”

Your gift of money to the Church and to other organizations that advance the cause of Christ, especially those that serve the poor, is important as an offering to the king.

What is even more important, however, is the offering of your worship. That is what incense represents. Incense was burned every day in the tabernacle and in the temple and is still burned today in catholic churches, both Eastern and Western, to represent the prayers and the offering of worship to God. That is really the central activity of the Church. Worship is the one thing that defines the proper relationship between us and God, and recognizes both His place and ours in the structure of the universe. There is nothing more important than that, and

there is no more important gift that you can bring to Christ than your participation in the corporate worship of the Church.

That brings us to the gift of myrrh. Please raise your hand if you know what myrrh is.

Okay, I looked it up. There is a certain species of balsam that is found in India as well as Arabia. The sap from that tree can be made into a kind of gel, or it can be left as a heavy liquid. It has a faintly bitter aroma and it has medicinal value as kind of analgesic. You may recall that Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh as he hung on the Cross. Myrrh was also used in embalming.

That may seem like a strange gift to bring to a child, but it prophesied the suffering and death that was to come for the Messiah. It also represents the most precious gift that you and I can offer to Jesus.

Most of us try to hide our weaknesses, our failures, and our sins. We are embarrassed by them and we do not want the world to see them. We even try to hide them from ourselves by ignoring them or denying them or rationalizing them away. But when we really want to be rid of them, we find someone we can trust and unburden ourselves to them.

Sometimes when people get married, they share their good feeling and experiences but try to hide their negative feelings and experiences from each other. That prevents the development of real intimacy, and they do not honor each other by doing that. People honor each other by trusting each other enough to share the bad along with the good and to make themselves vulnerable by exposing aspects of their lives that they are not proud of and are afraid to show in public. The marriage vows, taken seriously, allow people to do that.

Conclusion:

That kind of intimacy is what Jesus wants from us. He wants to heal us. He wants to comfort us. He wants to forgive us and to preserve us from death. But Jesus can only do that if we trust Him enough to lay before Him our lives in their totality – the bad as well as the good. There is nothing more precious that we can offer the Lord.

Like the wise men who arrived some time after the shepherds and the angels had left, we too have come late to the celebration. Many before us have recognized and honored the Christ. But the season of Epiphany will not be complete until we too have come into His presence and offered Him our gifts. He will gladly accept our gold, He will gladly accept our worship. He will also accept our sorrows, our sins, and our death. In return, He will give us joy and forgiveness and life.

The wise men offered him gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Let us also be wise and do the same.

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St. Alban's Anglican Catholic Church
Richmond, Virginia
January 6, 2009

ⁱ Priest Associate, St. David's Anglican Catholic Church, Charlottesville, Virginia.

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Isaiah 60:1-9 (KJV)*.

^{iv} *Isaiah 60:10-end (KJV)*.

^v *St. Matthew 2:1-12 (KJV)*.

^{vi} *St. Matthew 2:11b (RSV)*.