

*"Then opening their treasures, they offered gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh."*

The story of the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus is one which gets a ready response from people. It captures the imagination as it contains all the ingredients of a good story – romance, mystery and humility, as we see the mighty and wise paying homage to a baby in a stable.

There are too many today who look at this story in terms of whether it is historically accurate or not, so they miss the truth it sets forth. So much of the truth of the Bible doesn't depend on historical accuracy. To read much of the Bible in this way is like discussing the wrapping round a present rather than the present itself. Pretty wrappings enhance a gift but they should not divert attention from what is inside. This is a fault of childhood – a state which many adults have never grown beyond in matters of faith.

A little girl wrapped a box carefully in pretty paper to give as a present to her father. The family was poor and the father unwrapped the parcel to find an empty box. He started to berate his daughter for wasting the paper. "But daddy," she said, "the box wasn't empty. I filled it with 365 kisses for you for next year."

So the wise men journey and come to kneel before the infant Jesus and present their gifts. These were men who were held in great honour by their fellows for their knowledge and understanding of the mysteries of the universe and of life; yet they come to kneel in homage to this child. It is both a moving and challenging story.

The gifts they present sum up, as it were, the whole life and calling of Jesus – gold for a king, and representing all that is valuable and precious; frankincense indicating holiness; and myrrh pointing forward to sacrifice, as Jesus was to die on the Cross.

Some while ago I was talking to a young woman at a party and she told me that she had recently had what can only be described as a deeply moving experience of God's presence. It had left her with a feeling of excitement. She said that what saddened her was that so many others hadn't had such an experience. She wondered why it was that more don't, or can't, experience this closeness of God.

The reason may be twofold- our desire for comfort and security, of being in control of our lives; and our pride.

Most of us, perhaps unwittingly, reflect the values of our society, with its materialism and concentration on consumerism; its emphasis on individualism and self- fulfillment; its fear of failure and of death. And there is also a terrible intellectual snobbery which ridicules matters of faith, and in this historically Christian country, especially the Christian faith. For the most part we don't want to be challenged, or made to admit that we haven't got to the heart of what's important in life. And we don't want our comfortable existence, mainly under control and well ordered, upset – and life in the Holy Spirit never is under our control.

The story of the wise men is saying to us that unless we're prepared to adventure and to explore the journey of faith we'll never reach our full stature as God's children; and unless we're prepared to offer to God the things we most value, we'll never enter fully into our inheritance as God's children.

The first step on that journey is made at our Baptism, and in the BCP service, the parents and godparents promise three things. The first is to forswear the Devil and all his works – that is all evil. There's a stone carving in York Minster high up near the roof which shows a monster eating people. Those who spot it tend to laugh, but how can you depict the idea of evil destroying people?

Some of you may have visited the gardens at Heligan in Cornwall. They had become overgrown and were being cleared and restored. John Nelson was digging in an area of the gardens called the Tump. After a while his dog started acting strangely. Her hackles raised and she refused to go with him to the Tump. Then the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and it was as though a dark shape seemed to rise from the earth and disappear amongst the trees. Badly shaken, he reported what has happened. So they turned to the local Vicar for help. When they came to the Tump, there on the ground was a pentacle, a five pointed star used in magic and witchcraft. Prayers were said, and within days visitors were remarking a lighter, happier atmosphere in the garden, the lifting of a kind of darkness.

We can so easily forget in this secular and rational age that evil is a reality, however one wants to define it – a malign force which is utterly destructive. Only in yesterday's Times, Matthew Paris, an avowed atheist, was denying the reality of any evil beyond that inherent in human nature. And too many people play with forbidden things and forget that evil leaves its mark upon us in an insidious way. It can be likened to the rot in a pear, eating away at the inside, though the outside looks healthy. We need to be aware of the spiritual battle going on all around and within us.

The second thing we are to forswear is the vain pomp and vanity of the world. With the New Year's honours list newly out, it is an opportune time to recall this duty. It's a human failing that we like others to know how well we're doing, either openly by flaunting our wealth or knowledge; or covertly in more subtle ways. Perhaps much of the fashion industry and cosmetic and beauty trade come under this banner.

There's a true story told of the beautiful Marion who live in France at the time of the revolution. She was 18, and in the anti-clerical fervor of the times, it was planned to parade Marion through the streets of Paris, to escort her to the high altar at Notre Dame, and ceremoniously seat her on the altar, paying homage to her as the embodiment of secular truth and beauty. The girl was horrified, disfigured her face and fled, the scars remaining to mar her beauty all her life. Jesus reminds us that "where you treasure is, there will your heart be also." We have to be constantly alert to the dangers of worldly values leading us away from the worship and service of God.

The third thing we are to forswear are the sinful lusts of the flesh. From this many have argued that Christianity is a dour and forbidding religion, captured in Dyllan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood". In the opening verses, the narrator paints a picture of the sleeping town: "Only you can see the blinded bedrooms, the combs and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall and the yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead."

Of course, this phrase "Thou Shalt Not" is far from the truth about the Christian faith, but as so often happens, people make superficial judgements and never question further. What we are urged here is to have a right control over our appetites. We're not to turn eating into gluttony; drink into drunkenness; resting into laziness; love into lust. Our bodies are to be our servants not our masters. Like all sin, these eat away at our soul, captured in this cautionary tale:

I am dousing myself with cosmetics  
To stop me from smelling quite strong:  
Max Factor, Gillette,  
I've tried them all, yet  
I'm convinced that something is wrong.  
I go into Boots every Wednesday –  
The assistants are ever so nice –  
And there I buy Brut  
To make me feel cute  
And they're such a reasonable price.  
Yet still I'm convinced that something is wrong.  
I even tried Vim,  
My future looks dim,  
'Cos now I just foam when it rains.  
So, dear Estée Lauder, do tell me:  
When my hair is all dyed  
And I just can't decide.  
Is it a phase?

Please help me erase  
The sweet stain that lies deep inside.

We give up these things – evil, vanity and fleshly lusts- so that we may become the children of God with all that that means of personal fulfillment and inner peace. At the heart of the lack of faith today and the problems of the world, lie both a personal and corporate concern with self. To undertake the journey of faith, we have to look outward to our duties, never mind what we feel is due to us in response to God's love for us. The account of the visit of the wise men to the child Jesus captures the heart of the matter. They were open to discern God's guiding, calling them to journey; they set out in hope, not knowing how that journey would end; and they were not too intellectually proud to offer their worship to the child once they arrived.