

Sermon – Sunday 7th January 2024

One of my favourite services over Christmas is the one on Christmas morning. Throughout my time here at St. Mary's it has never been the best attended service, and I always miss having the choir to lead the musical aspects of worship. And yet there always seems to be a sense of joy and lightness. Christmas has arrived. The preparations are over. Turkeys are in the oven. There tends to be a sense that what will be will be.

During the service on Christmas morning, I will always ask whether people have opened any presents yet. Thankfully there are usually some who just can't wait until later in the day. Children have often opened their stocking, and will tell me with glee what they have received. From cook books to craft activities and games, there is a genuine sense of thankfulness and pleasure in the gifts that have been given.

Sometimes it can feel as though the giving and receiving of gifts becomes ever more complicated. I wonder whether we all find ourselves looking back to a past when things seemed easier. When it felt as though people had less "stuff" so a small gift was more gratefully received. Or when it seemed less likely that our friends and family were able to simply purchase anything they wanted. In some of my conversations before Christmas, people told me about different ways their families have found to make gift-giving both meaningful and manageable – Secret Santas, spending limits and the like.

The story of the Epiphany might help us to think about gifts in a slightly different way. To explore where we find the real gifts and how we can recognise them.

Perhaps the first place to start is the story of the Epiphany itself. Each year I discover that the various stories that we read in the scriptures are the most precious gifts. As I read them again and again, I hear different things. There is always something new to learn. There is both familiarity and novelty – recollecting things that I have learnt over the years and yet being enlightened in new ways. Do take time in the coming days to read and re-read the words of this gospel reading. It is Matthew at his finest. Not a word is wasted, and there is deep meaning and significance. As you read it, perhaps you will recall things that you have been told in sermons, talks and courses over the years about this passage.

In the reading, the wise men bring gifts to present to Jesus. We don't actually know how old Jesus is at this stage. The fact that Herod orders the murder of all children under two years' old suggests that the visit of the wise men may occur over a year after Jesus's birth. I do sometimes find myself wondering what the infant Jesus would have made of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They certainly never featured in my letters to Santa. But of course we know that the gifts in fact signify all that will happen to Jesus: representing his kingliness; that he will draw people to God; and his untimely death. While we tend to think of gifts as being purely about pleasure, I wonder whether over the years you have given or received something a little more meaningful.

One of the questions we find ourselves asking as the wise men leave their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, is who is really giving the gift and who is receiving. The gifts are really an act of homage. The wise men have come to worship Jesus because, as we are told, they recognise him as the King of the Jews. There are many extraordinary features to this. They are not Jewish themselves, and yet not only recognise his status, but also consider him worth of worship. They seem to see that he is a gift to the world. That his birth will change the world. And they want to mark that.

Many of you will have come across T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. In a profound way, Eliot searches his imagination as he explores what the experience might have been like for the wise men. He sets out the life that they may have lived in the East; what the journey was like; and how the wise men were changed by the experience. Eliot knows that it is the wise men who receive the gift of an encounter with the Christ child. And yet he does not over-simplify. This is something that changes everything for them. Their lives will never be the same again. And yet how they have been changed is mysterious. It is complicated. It presents challenge as well as opportunity. The gift we receive in the Christ child is one of love. And yet it does not guarantee us an easy life.

The word "epiphany" means manifestation. It is all about being shown something. There are times when I want to be shown something straightforward and uncomplicated. To suddenly know and understand. While we may all have had such moments of enlightenment, Eliot explores other aspects of the Epiphany. That there can be a dawning realisation of change. That meaning and understanding can be revealed over time. That complexity can await.

I wonder whether, over the next week or so, we might take some time to reflect on the gifts of this Christmas. What have been the most significant gifts that you have received? And what have been the most important gifts that you have given? Perhaps you have spent time with someone special. Or have been able to offer a word of advice or consolation that was especially needed. You may have been surprised by a trip or an encounter. The importance of giving and receiving gifts, at Christmas or any other time, is rarely what we expect. Sometimes we need to dig a little deeper or search a little harder.

And remember, too, that as well as receiving the gift of the Christ child each Christmas, we offer an important gift that no one else can give. And that is the gift of ourselves. As we reflect on the real gifts we have given and received this Christmas, it's likely that the most important ones are connected with our relationships. It can be easy to feel that who we are isn't quite good enough. And yet the real message of Epiphany is that the gift of ourselves – of our hearts – is always enough. It is precious and cherished. And as we step into a new year, we have an opportunity to recognise once again all that each of us has to offer and just what a gift that is.

Amen