

Did you bring the Myrrh?

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

I hope the year is off to a good start for you personally. On a wider front, I am sure that like me you have watched the fires in Australia and the murder of Iranian general Soleimani with deep concern. I am grateful for the night-time prayer from the New Zealand prayer book which says “Let the darkness of our lives and of the world rest in you,” We cannot carry the burdens of the world, those are God’s to carry.

But it has made me think a bit more about the Magi. In a different age, perhaps Soleimani might have been one of those Magi. They came from the East – probably from the lands we call Iraq and Iran. They were wise men – the Greek word is magi. Magi is a vague term for astronomers, astrologers and practitioners of esoteric knowledge perhaps from the Zoroastrian faith. They probably were not kings in the sense of having political power but they were powerful.

I have always imagined that the wise man came from a peaceful place – you know the pictures of camels against a peaceful evening sky. So I took a quick look at Wikipedia and found that they were probably from the Parthian Empire which was constantly at war with Rome. They were travelling into enemy territory and their journey may not have been an easy one in many ways. And of course, there was no mention of camels in the Gospel reading. We don’t know how they came.

We don’t know for sure that they were Gentiles, they could have been Jews living in Persia, but probably Matthew would have told us that. So this revelation of Jesus, the first proclamation of the alternate King of the Jews is made not by Jewish prophets but by leaders of another faith, another country. It took a while for the wise men of Jerusalem to catch up with what the foreigners were saying. Which points to the reality that there are many paths to God. Each of us is on an individual path but our journey is in the company of others who may see things quite differently.

We do not travel toward God primarily as individuals. Humans are at root social people. We travel together – even those who have a solitary calling as hermits are

expected to participate in a larger organization because it is only together that we find the way, as we help one another with our insights and our challenges.

A friend who knows some of us through Los Osos Cares, recently commented on what a diverse congregation St Ben's is in the way we look at things. I was delighted to hear her say that, because it is challenging to maintain different perspectives. Not only do we want to believe the same as other people but we tend to expect that everyone we like will think the same way as us about anything important. This is especially true at a time in our nation when differing viewpoints are anathema – a time when we really believe that we cannot talk with people from a different political persuasion. And when politics and the different strands of Christianity seem to align together we have a double whammy. It takes work to be inclusive.

Yet it is important work. If the magi had not consulted the wise men of Jerusalem, perhaps they would have lost sight of the star. If the wise men of Jerusalem had not met the magi, they would not have known that a possible Messiah was born in Bethlehem. We need each other to share our insights and to help us understand our God who is so much bigger than our single individual perceptions.

The gospel writer tells us that as well as a foreign perspective, the magi brought gifts, very specific gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. This is because of a verse in Isaiah - which is also where the camels come in. In a passage which begins with the familiar words, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you,” Isaiah says “⁶

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.” (Is 10: 1, 6)

As you know, part of the project of Matthew's gospel is to place Jesus firmly within the Jewish tradition and whenever possible the gospel writer points out similarities between his narrative and those of the ancient prophecies.

So the gold and the incense fulfil the prophecy, but myrrh? As the hymn writer tells us “its bitter perfume breathe a life of gathering gloom” and certainly myrrh was offered to Jesus in wine when he was being crucified and when he was burying Jesus, Nicodemus brought a mixture of aloe and myrrh. But that’s not the whole story. Myrrh was part of the holy incense used in the temple and also used in the anointing oil used to anoint kings and high priests.

These were gifts fit for a king, fit for a high priest, fit for a Messiah.

Each one of us has been given gifts which we can either hoard or give to God for God’s work among us and in the wider world. Yes these are our talents, our shiny special things which we love to give. Perhaps gifts of music, of hospitality, of cooking, of organization, of friendship... the list is long – but there are also the gifts that we are less sure about - the gifts of our woundedness – our anger, our fear, our shame, our anxiety, our dis-ease. These are gifts too. Myrrh is made by wounding a tree until the resin runs out.

As Leonard Cohen said, “There is a crack in everything – it’s how the light gets in.”

Just as myrrh is for holy anointing of that which gives life and of that which dies, our woundedness is a double-sided gift. It is what makes us uniquely us. The thing which continues to rub and bother us is also what builds us up as we tackle it again and again and again. Just as an oyster’s irritation creates a pearl. Ideas which we have which differ from those of others – those too build up the Body of Christ.

It is easy for us to think about giving God our gold – our shiny gifts and talents, maybe also our frankincense, the incense of our worship of God. But what about our myrrh?

I suspect that most of us try to leave our myrrh at home when we come to church. We think that there’s no place for it here. But it is also God’s gift. It is an integral part of our humanness. Why would we leave it at home?

I suspect that God longs for us to bring her our myrrh. As we stand uncertain in the doorway, carrying our gifts, she says “Gold? very pretty, Frankincense? lovely... but where’s the myrrh? Didn’t you bring the myrrh? Don’t tell me you left it at home...again.”

We are not whole as individuals nor as the Body of Christ in this place if we leave our myrrh at home and just bring our gold and frankincense to God. So today when we reach that part of the Eucharistic Prayer that says “And we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to you, O Lord of all; presenting to you, from your creation, this bread and this wine,” let us include in that sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving not just the gold and frankincense but also the myrrh of our lives.

God’s love is inclusive of every aspect of human life. God chose to be born as a human baby in the middle of the water and blood and messiness of birth into a not very clean stable. God allowed Godself to be abandoned, tortured, and to die in shame and agony and blood. God knows that it’s not all pretty. God knows that we don’t all agree. God knows that we want to hide parts of ourselves, even from ourselves.

And you know what? God is happy with us just the way we are. God created us and God continues every day to work with us in a making us a new Creation. And every evening God looks at this new creation in all its messy unfinishedness and sees that it is good.