

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Date: Sunday 3 January 2016

- Happy New Year!
- Hope you had a good Christmas with family and friends.
- We enjoyed time together and down time just catching up on sleep.
- Thank you for all the lovely cards and gifts Kathryn, Sue and I received from you – we are very grateful indeed.

One of the interesting debates on the radio I have been aware of this week is what to call the days between Christmas and New Year. People seemed genuinely puzzled. One person said we should call it a Winterregnum! What a wally!

The days between Christmas and the early part of January are called “Christmas”. I had thought that was obvious – but with all the sales and the holiday ads and the internet shopping starting so early these days, perhaps we lose sight of it rather more quickly than I had imagined.

The 12 days of Christmas starts with Christmas Day and funnily enough goes on for 12 days right through to the Feast of the Epiphany on the 6 Jan. So today is the last day really for singing Christmas Carols in church – as the 12 days of Christmas are up later this week.

But even the singing of carols is not as straightforward as we might have thought – esp when the Health and Safety people get to work. I gave you some advice on Christmas Day for the shepherds. Today we are focussing on the Wise Men.

Let me give you an example someone sent me just before Christmas ... the trouble starts with the carol we are singing today ...

*We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain, moor and mountain
Following yonder star*

- The gift of gold is still considered acceptable - as it may be redeemed at a later date through such organisations as 'cash for gold' etc.
- However, gifts of frankincense and myrrh are not appropriate due to the potential risk of oils and fragrances causing allergic reactions.
- A suggested gift alternative would be to make a donation to a worthy cause in the recipient's name or perhaps give a gift voucher.
- We would not advise that the traversing kings rely on navigation by stars in order to reach their destinations and suggest the use of RAC routefinder or satellite navigation. This will provide the quickest route and clear advice regarding fuel consumption.
- Please note as per the guidelines from the RSPCA for your Mr Donkey, the camels carrying the three kings of Orient will require regular food and rest breaks.
- Facemasks for the three kings are also advisable due to the likelihood of dust from the camel's hooves.

The reading we have heard is that for the feast of the Epiphany when traditionally we remember the visit of the Magi, or the coming of the wise men. Whether there were three men, we are not sure. Quite where they came from we are not sure. What we are pretty sure about is that there are three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Throughout the years of the Christian church these gifts have been regarded as very significant – perhaps in relation to the character of the “baby who was no ordinary baby” or indeed as signs of things yet to come.

Gold

The first gift is that for a king – the gift of financial resources which any child might need. We could see this as a kind of 1st Century Savings Bond which would be an investment for when baby became 18 or 21 or whatever age would have been appropriate then for them to cash it in. Maybe they could put it towards their university fees?

A gift of money is a good gift. And yet, of course, in his adult life, Jesus was at pains to make clear that money was of no consequence to him. God, our heavenly Father, could clothe the lilies of the field and provide for all our needs. Material wealth was therefore of little importance.

At the same time, Jesus taught that we should make the very best use of what we have – not store it up in barns for a rainy day – but use it to multiply his work in the world and bring relief and release where we can.

Gold for a king – but not any ordinary king: the King of kings travelling lightly, putting hope and confidence not in material and earthly things, but in his Father and in the coming of his kingdom.

Frankincense

The second gift indicates worship – that the baby would be in intimate relationship with his Father but also worshipped and adored by Jew and Gentile alike. The intimate relationship of Father and Son would be extended to include adopted brothers and sisters – the first members of a now world-wide family – men and women, boys and girls linked together not by blood or genes but by relationship to Jesus. “Members of the body of Christ” is how they, how we, would come to be known.

Incense heightens the senses as worship and praise is offered to Jesus – a plea to us to include and involve him in all of our everyday. A reminder that worship is not just for Sundays at particular times, but for any day any time.

Frankincense for the helpless babe, the man who was God, the one and only Son – gives a clue as to what would become of him later in life but also of how important and special he was from the very start.

Myrrh

The third gift was stranger still. A burial spice. The kind of jarring that comes when all else seems tuneful and harmonious. A strident chord. A discord even in the nursery rhyme stable. And yet, this awkwardness would later become very practical and very obvious as the early hopes and dreams gave way to opposition, derision, arrest, torture and death. We know how the story ends – not well for the carpenter.

And so this final gift reminds us that we cannot have Christmas without Lent, Holy Week and Easter. Birth and death mark out the parameters of a 30 year life like no other. A birth for the salvation of the world and a death for its sin.

Three gifts. Three signs. Three reminders that this baby, this young man, this adult, this King, this God, this crucified one, had both the capacity and the commission to change the world and the course of its history. And although 2000 years have gone by neither the capacity nor the commission has altered. And for this we give not only thanks and praise but also our lives and everything we are in his service and for his glory.

New Year is a great time to make resolutions: about eating and diet, about exercise, about taking something up, giving something up, making time for something or someone in our busy schedules. All kinds of things we commit to and then forget about within days if not weeks.

May I encourage us to consider two particular resolutions this year? These are to do with the most basic of Christian disciplines ... bible reading and prayer. And two basic questions: how and when?

How ...

Bible Reading

- Books
- CDs
- Apps on your phone – you can even have someone read it to you, like Nicky Gumbel from HTB in their Bible in a Year scheme.
- Use BR notes or helps like the Word for the Day series.

Prayer

- Use a prayer book
- Check on the internet for prayers – the C of E website has some great resources but there are many others.

- Use your own words – short “arrow” prayers when something goes well or you need special help or grace or patience.

When ...

Bible Reading and Prayer

- Morning Noon or Night
- Some of us are larks others are night owls. Others are at our best in the middle of the day.
- Work out what works best and stick to it for a bit ... we can always change around and try something else that might work better for us.

I was very struck by “Call The Midwife” over Christmas. We didn’t follow the last series but we did see the Christmas special. There was just something about the nuns and the nurses around the table, at their work, getting ready for Christmas in their uniforms or habits. This reminded me that the scriptures and prayer are or should be just part of our everyday routine and practice.

So morning noon or night. BR and Prayer are keys ways of developing our relationship with our heavenly Father. The practice of them could be one of our gifts to the baby Jesus alongside our money, worship and sacrifice represented by gold frankincense and myrrh.

If he had had both the capacity and the commission to change the world and the course of its history in his day, what a privilege it is to join him in that work today, this new year and always. And getting resolved about bible reading and prayer show that we are really serious about this – it could make all the difference in the world. Amen.