

**May I speak in the name of the living God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Yesterday was the feast of the Epiphany. The day when we remember the journey of the wise men to present their gifts to the newborn Christ child.

It is celebrated in different ways around the world.

In Spain, 6th January is a fiesta – the festival of the three kings they call it - and a wonderful occasion it is, with fireworks and processions and everything that makes up a Spanish fiesta. But it is the children who look forward to it most of all, because it is then they receive their Christmas presents. On the Mediterranean coast, where it is warm in January, every one is out early and all the children are riding their new bikes and showing off their new toys. I think it is a lovely tradition because it celebrates what the festival commemorates, the gifts of the wise men to the infant Jesus.

Although the original gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh would not actually be terribly appealing to modern children – they have a special significance, for they reveal to us important truths about the child to whom they were given, and help us to reflect upon the gifts that we have to offer Christ at the start of this new year.

The wise men, who had travelled a significant distance to present their gifts to the new born child, took gold – the most precious of metals – a gift fit for a king.

They took, frankincense, which is still used today in worship. As the grains of incense are burnt, the smoke rises towards heaven, symbolising our prayers and our praise – a gift appropriate for the Son of God, who is worthy of our worship and thanksgiving.

Thirdly, they presented myrrh, a precious oil used for anointing of bodies at the time of death. Symbolic of the sacrifice that Jesus was to make in giving his life for the life of the world on the cross, some 33 years later.

Oil is also used for the anointing of those called for a special and particular role, as a sign of God's blessing upon them in this task. From Old Testament times, kings and priests were anointed, as symbol of God's power at work in and through them. Jesus, throughout his life and ministry demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God's power was at work in and through him – later in the Epiphany season, we shall recall his baptism, and his early miracles that revealed to everyone around him his divine power. Within our own traditions, the monarch of this country is anointed with holy oil, as are priests, and every new Christian is anointed with oil at the time of baptism and confirmation as a sign of God's unique calling to each one of us, as we seek to give our lives in his service.

The gifts of the wise men have a special significance then – both in revealing something about Christ, and also challenging us to offer our own gifts.

The wise men brought Gold – the most precious thing they could think of offering to a king. What is precious to us that we can offer to Jesus in a new way at the start of this New Year?

Many people within the life of our church give generously and sacrificially of their financial resources. That is certainly one aspect of giving that we can think about. But I would like to suggest that for many of us – one of the most precious things that we can give is our time. In our busy and time pressured society – time is something that we do not give away lightly.

Have you noticed that very often these days, if you spend some time talking with someone, or helping them with a practical task – what they very often say, is – not thank you for helping me with that, or that advice and information was very helpful – but – “thank you for your time.”

There is a general recognition that time is precious and that the giving of it is a significant gesture of concern for someone’s well being.

Spending time with someone, is then one of the most precious and special things that we can do.

At the start of this new year, following the example of the wise men then, we could each resolve to give a little more time to God.

This means making proper time for ourselves –
Time to work, rest, play and reflect.

It means making time for our loved ones –
To give them the love, support and care that they
deserve.

It means making time for others around us –
To listen, encourage, serve and share.

And it means alongside all of this, making time for
God –
To read his word, to offer our prayers, to seek his
will and to respond to his call to each one of us.

This naturally feeds into our consideration of the
second gift. If the wise men brought frankincense
as a symbol of their worship – what can we give?

Clearly, times spent together here in church are
important. Our shared times of prayer, and praise
and celebration of the Eucharist together, are a
expression of our thanks and worship to God for all
that he has given us in creation, and through his
Son, Jesus Christ.

The Anglo Saxon root of the word worship means “to honour” – and we give honour to God – not just in our times of praise and thanksgiving, but also in the way that we live our lives.

There is absolutely no point spending an hour in church each week throughout the year, if it has no impact on our lives throughout the rest of the week. As St James in his epistle says – faith without works is worthless.

The real depth of our thanks and praise is measured not so much in our shared times here in church, but the way in which we model the teaching and example of Christ out there each and every day of the year.

Confronted with a choice between right and wrong – do we always choose what we know to be right?

Confronted with the choice between benefiting ourselves and benefiting others – do we put others first?

When we are faced with a situation of conflict – do we immediately take sides, or seek a way of reconciling both parties with an amicable solution?

When we meet someone very different to ourselves, do we ignore them, or try to see things from their perspective?

When we meet someone with a desperate need – do we immediately think “someone else will look after them,” or do we think of some practical thing that we ourselves could do?

When we have done something to upset someone else, are we prepared to make the first step in admitting our wrong and seeking forgiveness?

This year, if we are following the example of the wise men, we can make sure that we worship God, not just in words and songs, but also by the way in which we seek to put Jesus’ teaching and example into practice.

The chorister's prayer is an appropriate prayer for each of us:

Bless us o Lord who minister in they temple;
Grant that what we sing with our lips,
we may believe in our hearts;
and what we believe in our hearts,
we may show forth in our lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What do we make of the third gift – myrrh?
It is a reminder of sacrifice.
It is a reminder of responding to God's call.
It is a sign of God's blessing in all that we do for him.

As I said earlier – every single Christian, at baptism and Confirmation is anointed with holy oil as a reminder of God's call to each one of us, to commit our lives to serving him, wherever we are and in whatever we do.

For some, this means responding to a lifelong vocation as a priest, or member of a religious community. For many, it is about recognising a vocation within one of the caring professions, as a doctor, or nurse, or care assistant.

For each and everyone of us, it is about acknowledging that we have particular Gifts and talents, which God has given us. At various times in our lives, he will call us to use these in a particular way. This might be something long-term, or something that lasts for a very short and specific time period. The important thing is being open to this call – being ready to respond as and when God needs us to – so that we can be effective channels of his love and grace at that particular point of need.

If you haven't made a New Year resolution yet – perhaps God might be trying to tell you something. During the next few days and weeks, just open your heart and mind to God, and offer yourself to him – seek whether there may be something that his is calling you to do, or change in your life.

The wise men brought precious gold,

We bring our precious time.

The wise men brought frankincense,

We offer our worship, not just in prayer and praise, but in the way we live our lives.

The wise men brought myrrh for anointing,

We who have been anointed in our baptism and confirmation, offer ourselves in his service and open our hearts and minds to his call.

Like the wise men, may we offer each of these gifts with real commitment.

No-one knows exactly how far their journey was. It has been suggested that it may have been up to 1000 miles across deserts and plains, over mountains and through deep valleys, with many dangers along the way. It was a journey that called for commitment – a commitment that they gave, because they desired with all their hearts to know the Son of God, the promised messiah and make him part of their lives.

At the start of this New Year, we have the opportunity to renew our commitment to walk with Christ – wherever the journey of this year takes us – we can be confident that he will be at our side – because he is Emmanuel – God with us.

Amen.