

SERMON on Matthew 2:1-12
- after singing “We three kings”
Rev David Fotheringham
High Street Uniting Church
30/12/2018

Let us pray
Guide us on our journey, O God,
that we may respond to your prompting
with courage and joy.
Amen.

“We three kings of Orient are” is a song rich with theological meaning, and yet also full of questions for the purists. The classic question is: how many kings were there? To which you would all say.....? (*expecting “we don’t know”*)
None!

Probably.

Yes, there weren’t necessarily three – they just had three gifts. But were any of them kings? Not according to Matthew’s gospel! They were magi, or wise-men, from the East.

So, where does the idea that they were kings come from? The answer is actually still Biblical, but resting on some presumptions...

Psalm 72 says that Kings of Tarshish, Arabia and Saba all come to pay tribute and offer gifts, and so there’s a tendency to connect Psalm 72 with this scene.

Psalm 72 is, in fact, a prayer for the king, and it’s all about the king being just and compassionate, and having a broad reign and a name that endures forever. It’s actually worth reading as a whole in this context – so I’ll get you to read it responsively with me...

¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king’s son.

² **May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.**

³ May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.

⁴ **May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.**

⁵ May he live^[a] while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

⁶ **May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.**

⁷ In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

⁸ **May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.**

⁹ May his foes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust.

¹⁰ **May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,**

**may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.**

¹¹ May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.

¹² **For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.**

¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

¹⁴ **From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.**

¹⁵ Long may he live!

May gold of Sheba be given to him.

**May prayer be made for him continually,
and blessings invoked for him all day long.**

¹⁶ May there be abundance of grain in the land;
may it wave on the tops of the mountains;
may its fruit be like Lebanon;

**and may people blossom in the cities
like the grass of the field.**

¹⁷ May his name endure forever,
his fame continue as long as the sun.

**May all nations be blessed in him;
may they pronounce him happy.**

¹⁸ Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.

¹⁹ **Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth.**

Amen and Amen.

I think that with a Psalm like that it's entirely understandable for the tradition to have developed that the wise-men were the equivalents of the foreign kings in this Psalm.

I said that the song "We three kings" was also rich in theological meaning. That's because of the way that it talks about the three gifts that the foreigners bring.

And, of course, the very fact that they are foreigners is tremendously significant. We can reach back much further than the Psalms to hear, even in the call to Abraham, God's intention to bring blessing to all the nations, - even us - and throughout the Hebrew scriptures there are plenty of echoes of that. Matthew's gospel, written for a mostly Jewish primary audience, begins with this, and ends with Jesus' commissioning his disciples to go to all the world, with the gift of Jesus' teaching and his presence, to the end of the age.

But for now, we have these particular gifts being brought to him.

While Matthew doesn't spell out the meaning of the gifts, they've been talked about since the first centuries, and the song "We three kings" picks them up those allusions.

As the song says, Gold is used for crowns, and as such is fit for a King.

Frankincense is clearly associated with worship, with the presence of a deity. The rituals in which the foreigners had used it may have been for foreign deities, which is interesting. But it is clearly associated with divine presence, and its use as a gift may signify that.

Myrrh, the song says, was associated with death, being used in embalming – and indeed it is mentioned in John's gospel, when Nicodemus provided some for embalming Jesus' body when they were putting it into the tomb.

I'd want to add that Mary and Joseph wouldn't have been horrified by it as a gift, certainly not just used for burials; it was also an expensive and lovely fragrance, even though in hindsight we can read an association with Jesus' death into it. Similar comments could be made about the Frankincense.

But those were not the only gifts that the magi brought.

The real reason why they went to Jesus was stated several times in the Bible reading. They went to...
... pay him homage.

The New Revised Standard Version that we read today used the phrase "pay him homage" to translate the Greek, and it's a good translation – earlier versions used the word worship, but "pay him homage" is probably more evocative and more helpful in picturing them bowing before him.

It's clear that they did this, first. That was their first gift.

If the other gifts had been given first you might wonder if they were coming to bargain with another equal, giving gifts subtly to put the other into debt; but no, they came with themselves first, paying homage; which was the much more important.

For us, inasmuch as we are on a journey to see and know and worship God, who is revealed in Jesus, giving ourselves first is clearly the most important.

Then the three gifts might be intended to speak to us about what we give, and not just about the one who receives them.

The gift of gold might be about recognising Jesus as king, but how might we translate it into what we give? The obvious answer is money, but I don't think that the magi gave gold as a form of coinage – or they would have given coins- so I suggest a different interpretation. If I think back to times when someone has told me a story and I've said, "that's gold!", it's meant that the story has had either humour or love that is priceless in it. When our stories contain gold – when we offer gifts of good deeds or generous acceptance or listening or presence or time, as well as finances, that's gold! When we are journeying with Jesus there are always opportunities to share gold.

Next: In Psalm 141, there's a line, "let my prayer be counted as incense before you". So perhaps for us, it is worth recognising that our prayers, as halting or mixed up or eloquent as they may be, actually are valued as a gift of our trust; suggested by the Frankincense. After all, when we place our deepest anxieties or our hopes before someone, we only do it when we trust them; and so when in our prayers we are placing deepest anxieties and hopes before God, it is sign our trust, and a gift in our relationship with God.

And then the myrrh might speak to us in terms not just of Jesus' death, but of our own giving over of our lives. For we may all know different forms of suffering or sacrifice in our lives, but in it all, Jesus walks the journey with us, and knowing God's love for us even through the darkest valleys is like a sweet balm for our souls.

By the grace of God, the foreign seekers were led to Jesus through a mixture of studying and dreaming, reflecting on Scriptures and insights from others. They came to pay homage to the one who was God and King and Sacrifice.

They brought gold – their very coming was a breathtaking gift for Mary and Joseph, their presence itself was gold;

They brought frankincense – prepared to bring their dreams and their prayers, such was their trust – what a gift.

They brought myrrh – in whatever struggles they had along their way they were accompanied by the fragrance of the balm, so even their hardships were transformed as they came to Jesus.

Gold in our stories;

incense in our prayers;

myrrh in our hardships transformed as they are brought to him;

The gifts that we might bring before our king.