



# Sunday Reflection Sunday Reflection Ordinary Time



in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew  
& St Johns, Johnstone

For Sunday 7 January 2024

# Celebrating Epiphany

**at St Johns the Curate will preach**

Today we celebrate the Epiphany. The three kings are close to their final journey's end. It is a good time to think about gifts – those we receive as well as those we give.

*When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (Matthew 2.10)*

## **An illustration to set the scene**

Where do you stand on regifting? That's when you give to someone else a present you have received and don't want to keep. It seems a good way to avoid waste and may be even more respectful than just hiding – or even throwing away – the gift. But I do feel a bit squeamish about it. I suppose it goes back to what I was told as a child, 'it's the thought that counts'. The only time I do it is when I am given a second copy of a book I already have and then there is

something joyous in sharing with someone else an experience that has given you pleasure.

'Paying forward' is a practice a bit like regifting, except that it isn't a cost-free way of giving. You buy a coffee, say, and at the same time you pay for another for a person (unknown) who might come in later and want one, but not be able to afford it. So you pass on the pleasure you are about to enjoy yourself. And part of the pleasure in this kind of giving is that you have no idea who it is who will benefit.

## **Today's Gospel teaching**

There is nothing in Matthew's Gospel to suggest that today's visitors from the East were kings, and indeed it is only a guess, based on the number of gifts, that there were three of them. Likely they were traditionally given their kingly status because of the association of the story with today's Psalm:

*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles  
render him tribute.*

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

*May all kings fall down before him,  
All nations give him service. (Psalm 72.10-11).*

Matthew describes them as 'wise men'. They may have been Zoroastrian priest-astrologers, readers of the sky and of prophecies. Despite the mystery surrounding them, they seem to have been extremely practical, men of science. They ask Herod where to go to find the Messiah, they find their way then and they have the sense not to believe Herod and they don't go back and tell him where to find the Christ child.

The climax of the story is when they reach the house where Jesus is.

*...ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that*

*the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2. 9b-11).*

If there were any doubt that the wise men or Magi were engaged in paying homage, their gifts make very clear that it is the child, not them who is the king. Gold (the precious metal), frankincense (perfume or incense) and myrrh (the oil of anointing) were the standard offerings to a deity or king. The scene is one more demonstration of the child's holy vocation and his supreme authority.

### **How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?**

As many artistic representations of the scene make clear, there is a paradox, the gift of high office is offered to a child to whom his wise elders kneel.

I expect you have seen the joke – if it had been three wise women they would have arrived on time, cleaned stable, brought practical gift and made a casserole. But there is a serious point to the Gospel story which our other readings help to unpack. This king is a ruler of a very different kind from the scheming, cruel Herod. His kingship is about justice and the defence of those in need. He has been sent and anointed for this mission.

In the Psalm, the gifts brought by kings are only the last of the blessings wished upon him. The first gift that the Psalmist asks to be given him is justice.

*Give the king your justice, O God  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness  
and your poor with justice. (Psalm 72.1-2)*

And what beautiful gifts are wished upon his head:

- to live as long as the sun and moon
- to be so merciful that he is like rain falling on the earth to nourish it.

These are gifts for eternity to the ever-living Lord, not gifts to be returned.

And these gifts endow the receiver with a mission – to redeem people from oppression and to offer life in place of violence:

*For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper. (v12)*

St. Paul understood the he inestimable gift of grace he had been given in the same way -a free gift, but also a down payment for the mission that gift had bestowed on him.

*This grace has been given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ. (Ephesians 3.8b)*

Like the wise men, we have had the precious honour of worshipping the Christ child. As the prophet Isaiah declared,

*Arise, shine, for your light has come  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. (Isaiah 60.1)*

And the wise men were overwhelmed with joy when they found the Christ child.

In the year ahead, how can each one of us best pay forward the precious gift we have received? Pause for a moment, enjoy receiving the best present you'll ever have. Hold onto it, keep it close, and then pass it on. Share the joy in whatever way you can and have confidence in God's purpose for you as a child beloved of God.

*When they saw that the star had stopped, they were  
overwhelmed with joy. (Matthew 2.10)*

# at St Margarets Rev Robert Chambers will preach

The text is not available for putting online this Sunday

[www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk](http://www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk)