

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Well, today is the last Sunday before Christmas - we've almost reached the big day! Have you got everything organised or is there still some last minute shopping to be done? Christmas is a wonderful time for most, but I know for some it is sad and lonely. For some, the stress levels go "through the roof" as they worry about getting everything just right, and you have to wonder sometimes if we have lost sight of what it's all about.

The clue is in the word Christmas - it is supposed to be about Christ. Some years ago someone coined the phrase "Jesus is the reason for the season". Let us remember that this Christmas!

If I was to ask you what the best thing about Christmas is, I guess I would get many different answers. However, if I asked children the same question, I know that receiving presents would almost certainly be top of the list! I'm not really sure but I expect the giving of gifts pre-dates Saint Nicholas or Santa Claus and has its roots in the Christmas story itself with the wise men who offered gifts to the young child Jesus Christ (see Matthew 2:1-12). In our talk today, I want to focus our thoughts on these wise men or more exactly the gifts they brought to Jesus.

In the Gospels we read three times of "wise people". In fact they are all found in Matthew's Gospel: first in Matthew 2:1-12 we read about the "wise men" who searched for Jesus; then in Matthew 7:24-27 we read about the "wise man" who built his house upon the rock; and finally we read in Matthew 25:1-13 about the "wise virgins" (or maidens) who waited for the bridegroom. Now that's a message in itself - wise people seek Jesus, build their lives on Jesus and wait for the return of Jesus. Let us be amongst the wise!

Perhaps you have been at a nativity play or intend going to one in the next day or so. You will have seen the baby Jesus cradled in a manger with Joseph and Mary taking care of Him. You'll have sung about the "cattle lowing". Let us pause for a moment and think of the fact that the Son of God was born in such humble surroundings, the creator of "all things" and the one who upholds "all things" by the word of His power (see Colossians 1:17), became flesh and was born in a cattle shed because there was no room in the inns of Bethlehem (Luke 2:7). We are all familiar with the story in Luke's Gospel 2:8-20 of the angels who rejoiced saying, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). That was spoken to the shepherds and they were first on the scene at the birth of the Saviour.

After the shepherds, it's the turn of the wise men - the three kings with their crowns and fine costumes bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (see Matthew 2:1-12). I remember one year at our school nativity play there were five kings to give everyone a part in the play but really the Bible doesn't tell us how many there were. Nor did they find the baby in the manger as the shepherds did, but they found the child in a house (see Matthew 2:11). If we read the story carefully and take account of the response of King Herod, we would conclude that the wise men came weeks or even months after the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to read the story from the Gospel by Matthew 1:18-2:12 and then consider briefly who were these wise men, and what can we learn from the gifts they brought.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people

together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way", Matthew 1:18-2:12

What wonderful verses! How often we think about His name Jesus meaning "Jehovah the Saviour" (see Matthew 1:21), and Emmanuel meaning "God with us" (see Matthew 1:23). In these two names we have two wonderful truths declared: that Jesus was a true man but that He never ceased to be God. I think Charles Wesley states this beautifully in his carol:

*"Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity".*

So who were these wise men or magi who travelled from the East following the star? Well not much is known about them. They would have been Gentiles (non Jews), perhaps an early proof that the child born was not only to be the "King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) but the "Saviour of the world" (see 1 John 4:14). They would have been very clever men, some believe they were astrologers and obviously their interest in the star brought them to Jerusalem. I rather think, though, that they were Divinely instructed to come and worship the newborn King. They may have studied the prophecies of the Old Testament and their understanding was in stark contrast to the unbelief of the Jewish nation and their religious leaders, who could quote the Scriptures but seemed unaware of what was happening at this time. Their arrival certainly caused a stir! Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled at the thought of a "rival" King (Matthew 2:3). Herod's words were noble - he wanted the wise men to tell him where this child was, so he could also come and worship (Matthew 2:8) but his intentions were evil. Being warned of God, the wise men went home another way (Matthew 2:12) and Herod's evil plans were dashed. So great was Herod's fury that he proceeded to slaughter all the male children in the region of Bethlehem who were two years old and under (Matthew 2:16-18). What an awful thing to do; and what grief there must have been in Bethlehem at that time!

So these wise men found the child and fell down and worshipped Him, presenting their gifts (Matthew 2:11). These were very valuable; in fact they are described as "treasures". The Lord Jesus Christ was born into a poor family and very soon after the visit of the magi Joseph and Mary would have to flee to Egypt in fear of Herod who was determined to kill the child Jesus (Matthew 2:13-21). I have no doubt that these gifts were sold and the money used to pay for the costs of this journey and the expenses the family would have in Egypt.

At Christmas time, we go to great lengths to try and make sure we give the right gifts to those we love. Perhaps we've been listening for weeks to catch the odd hint given to steer us in the right direction. It's always good when the gift we give is just what was wanted! I believe in the same way great care was taken in relation to gifts the wise men gave. Furthermore, I believe that their choice of gifts was guided by God Himself. The gold, the frankincense and the myrrh would instruct us and I would like us now to consider each of these in turn.

The gold

Gold is a very precious metal and its value is very stable. Gold is first mentioned in the Bible in the book of Genesis 2:11 but much more in Exodus in the times of Moses when gold was used extensively in the tabernacle of God in the wilderness. In Exodus 25:3 you will read that gold is at the top of the list of things which the people of Israel were to contribute so that the tabernacle could be made, "according to the pattern" which God gave to Moses (Exodus 25:1-9). The instructions were first given for the furniture of the sanctuary, the ark of the covenant, the table of showbread, the golden lampstand, and the altar of incense, all to be made or overlaid with pure gold. Most Bible teachers would agree that gold speaks of God and His deity.

It would also speak of divine righteousness. The mercy seat described in Exodus 25:17, (which was really the lid of the ark) would clearly speak of this. The blood sprinkled before and on the mercy seat was the only way that atonement could be made for the sins of the people. You see, we cannot think of the Christmas story independently of the Easter story. The "child" born in the narratives of Matthew 1:18-2:23 and Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-40 is the "Son" who is given in John's account. Why was the Son given? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life". John 3:16.

As the hymn writer so wonderfully puts it:

*“This Saviour is the Mighty God,
The God of heaven above.
Revealed in flesh He shed His blood,
Blest proof of endless love.”*

Thomas Kelly (1769-1854)

So the gold would instruct us that although God became man in the Person of the Son, the Son never ceased to be God. This shines through in the Gospels; and that Jesus is God is fundamental to the Christian faith. Not that He was a god but that He **was** God. John 1:1. The signs recorded in John’s Gospel; the water turned to wine (John 2:1-12), the sick and lame healed (John 4:46-5:15), the multitudes fed (John 6:5-14), the storm calmed (John 6:15-21), the blind made to see (John 9:1-7) and the dead raised (John 11:1-44), are all recorded so that we might believe “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in His name”, John 20:31.

I have no doubt that this is the lesson which God intended us to learn by these wise men presenting gold to the Lord Jesus Christ at His birth.

The frankincense

Frankincense is a resin or gum which exudes through the leaves, twigs and bark of the boswellia tree. It is fragrant and when it is burned the aroma is very pleasant. Frankincense is first mentioned in the Scriptures in Exodus 30:34 where we read it formed part of the incense which priests used in the tabernacle. However we read much more of frankincense in Leviticus 2:1-2, 15-16 in relation to the meal offering. Now the meal offering is without blood and I think Bible scholars would readily agree that it is a type or picture of the perfect life of Christ which ascended to God in worship. In the meal offering, the Lord Jesus Christ is viewed as fine flour: no roughness or unevenness in His perfect manhood. The fine flour was both mingled and anointed with oil which is a type of the Holy Spirit.

It has often been noted that both honey and leaven were **not** to be included in the meal offering (Leviticus 2:11). Honey would speak of natural sweetness and leaven **always** speaks of evil - neither were to be seen in the person of the Christ. But the frankincense was to be burned together with the meal offering. This offering was a voluntary offering: a sweet savour offering to God and it typified the perfect, sinless life of the Lord Jesus Christ lived in this world which ascended to God in acceptable worship. At the beginning of His public ministry as He was being baptised by John in the river Jordan (Luke 3:21-22), the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and the Father’s voice was heard saying, “Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased”, Luke 3:22. Although we know little of the so called “silent years” of our Lord’s life, there was obviously that which ascended to the Father as a sweet savour.

The hymn writer says of the Lord Jesus Christ:

*“In Thee all human graces blend
And to Thy Father e’er ascend
As incense rare;
Fragrant to Him Thou ever art,
Source of rejoicing to His heart,
Most sweet and fair.”*

SM Walker (1848-1918)

Never before had there been a perfect life lived in this world. Just think of the pleasure this must have brought to the heart of the Father to see His beloved Son live that life. Even those who were the enemies of Jesus had to marvel at the words He spoke. On one occasion they exclaimed, “Never man spake like this man”! (see John 7:46). In every thought, action and word, that which was typified in the incense of the tabernacle and the sweet savour of the meal offering ascended to God.

I have no doubt that the value of the perfect life of His Son is what God intended us to learn by these wise men presenting frankincense to the Lord Jesus Christ at His birth.

The myrrh

Myrrh is an aromatic resin which comes from the commiphora abyssinica bush. The gum distils in tear shaped nodules and is bitter, yet with a sweet fragrance. In Exodus 30:22-33 we read about the holy anointing oil used to anoint the furniture of the tabernacle as well as the priests, Aaron and his sons. Although myrrh was the chief

ingredient in the holy anointing oil, it was not to be mixed in the incense. The word “marah” (meaning bitter, see Exodus 15:23) comes from the word myrrh and the Greek for myrrh is *smyrna*, which is the name of the suffering church of Revelation 2:8-11. We also read of myrrh at the Lord’s crucifixion where it was offered (mixed with wine) as a stupefying drink to alleviate the pain, but He refused it (Mark 15:23). Afterwards Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to prepare the Lord’s body for burial (John 19:39). I think most Bible scholars would agree that myrrh would speak of suffering and death.

We have already stated that we should not view the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ independently but remember why He was born. “Thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). How was He to do this? By dying on the cross of Calvary. The death of the Lord Jesus Christ is also fundamental to the Christian faith; we simply cannot do without it; there is no salvation apart from it. The cross of Christ is the righteous basis on which God can forgive our sins and bless us according to His heart of love. As we have considered, this was typified in the tabernacle with everything being anointed with the holy anointing oil.

But what about the sweet odour? Well, even in the suffering which the Lord Jesus went through there was that which ascended to God and brought pleasure to Him. All through His life as He suffered for righteousness’ sake, there was that fragrance for God. As He hung upon the cross, suffering the most horrendous physical pain, He prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). And greater still were the vicarious sufferings, that is, suffering for our sins, which were unseen by men but brought glory to God. There in those hours of darkness on the cross, the holy, sinless Son of God gave a very full answer to the sin question and, as a result, God’s mercy and grace flows out to us who believe.

The early church at Smyrna suffered terribly (Revelation 2:8-11), just as many Christians overseas do today. What comfort it is to know that God takes full account of the suffering of His people, the fragrance of the myrrh ascends to Him.

I have no doubt that the value of the suffering and death of His Son is what God intended us to learn by these wise men presenting myrrh to the Lord Jesus Christ at His birth.

So may we all learn the lessons of these wise men and their gifts and may God bless you all this Christmas.

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