

## Epiphany Evensong 2016 Jesus College Oxford Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> January

Isaiah 60:1-6  
Matthew 2:1-12

“Giving Well”

In nomine...

What did you get for Christmas?

We think of “gifts” as good things. But... Last October my husband Adrian was given a book to review. A book lacking in both content and style. Having razzed off a dissatisfied review, he gave the book away as a gift to someone who was building a library on that subject. But on Christmas Day, a well-meaning parishioner gave him exactly the same book again. “You shouldn’t have... no, you really shouldn’t have...”

Sometimes presents aren’t as good as they’re cracked up to be. We feign gratitude while wondering which charity shop we can safely take it to. We feel we have to pretend it’s the only thing we’ve ever wanted.

What about Jesus? And Mary, and Joseph? Matthew tells of the Magi bringing Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Notice that we’re not actually told how many magi there were (was it a massive deputation? Or just a couple of chaps whom their eastern peers thought were a bit off their trolley?) But we assume there are three, because there are three gifts. Now I’m not going to take a completely literalist view of this story, but it’s clear that Matthew had some important things to say. What were they?

The gifts say something both about the givers and the receivers. The givers: they’re wealthy, and they’re into the symbolic. Wealthy – you’ve got to have a certain amount of substance to be bringing gifts like this, particularly the gold. And symbolic: they’re giving gifts which reveal who the receiver is. Gold signifies kingship. Jesus is a King (albeit a new kind of King), hence Herod’s fear and terrible reaction. Frankincense signifies

priesthood. Jesus is a priest, he is close to God, and he will make sacrifices for his people. And myrrh signifies death.

Charming, huh? That's a bit like a stranger rocking up in the maternity ward and bringing the best kind of embalming fluid for the baby, or a small trust fund for the flowers for his coffin. Notice that's the one gift of the three which isn't in the Isaiah passage. It's not an obvious present... What do you think Mary said? Here they were, refugees in an outhouse without heating or double glazing or indeed doors, and they get presented with a big weighty box full of precious metal that belonged in a bank or a safe; some posh perfume that smelt a bit like old churches (I know that's anachronistic, but you know what I mean), and means of preparation for the child's funeral. Well, thanks a bunch. Poor old Mary and Joseph. In another Gospel, Luke's gospel, a few days later Mary presents the baby Jesus at the Temple like good Jews had to do, and they bring the offering that poor people had to bring. It doesn't look like they've just been given a fat lot of gold there, or indeed managed to hang onto it for long.

And the magi have cleared off. No one to help them carry all this stuff. What would they do with it anyway? They even have to wander in Egypt before going home. They'd probably prefer to travel light.

They may be deeply impractical gifts, but the magi really care about who Jesus is. Note this: they know he's a king, but they don't start with the Royal Family, Herod's line. Instead they wander around Jerusalem asking people on the streets. They only go and see Herod when he invites them. They understand what kind of a king Herod is, and what kind of a king Jesus is. And their gifts are of lifelong relevance for this infant king. Especially the myrrh, which really does last - a lifetime.

We might give godchildren silver napkin rings at their Christenings. Or necklaces with a cross. Or silver tankards. Gifts that they'll grow into. A gift that's not just for Christmas...

When you give, *why do you give?* There's a saying – “If you meet an unmixed motive, suspect it!” Can we ever give purely for the sake of the other? That's the ideal but I'm not sure how often we can really manage it... Are you giving because it makes you yourself feel good? That's something that completely benefits our homeless population. I know a lot of you work with the Turl Street Homeless Action group – and that's wonderful, don't get me wrong. I hear people who are on the streets, or who work with people on the streets, saying how important that is and how much they appreciate it. I think you're fabulous.

But you're probably getting something out of it yourselves too. Even if it's hugely costly – like the Magi taking a very long journey and giving away expensive presents. The people who really came away richer from that Epiphany encounter weren't Mary and Joseph and Jesus – but the magi. They gave, but they received back more than they gave. So yes, give to those who are needy, but do it knowing it's doing you good too. It can give us CV points or a community work prize. It can give us experience of people, relationships, different kinds of lives. If you're giving to the College – which of course I hope you all will do in the future when you're earning huge salaries! – perhaps you're having a room named after you, or a Fellowship, or a scholarship. In short, you're making sure that this place remembers you and appreciates you, and you stay connected. Giving makes us feel good. Giving makes us receivers.

When you give, *how do you give?* Do you give something that in fact you'd like to receive? Or are you giving something that's precisely what the person wants, even if you actually prefer to be giving them something else...? Are your gifts about the receiver, or the giver? The Epiphany story shows it can be both. Giving well is a mutual thing. Some of you will get married in the years to come - and right now I should pass quickly over the controversies about marriage in the Church of England this week gone. But, in the C of E marriage service, there's the chance to have either one or two wedding rings. If a couple chooses to have just one ring between them, they are both sharing in the giving and the receiving. The one ring is a sign of that mutuality. When I give “all that I

am”, I give my grumpiness as well as my good points. I give my weaknesses as well as my strengths. And when “all that I am” is received, I am not only entrusting my vulnerability to someone else, but that other is responding to my needs too. Again, giving makes us receivers.

And when you give, *to whom do you give?* Do you give to people who can repay you, either in kind or some other way? Or do you give to people who may simply feel indebted to you? People who can never give back to you – or to anyone else – in the way they have received? Do we become disappointed givers because we never realised we were actually unconsciously hoping we’d be thanked, or appreciated? Do we set up obligations that can never be fulfilled? What does that say about the personhood of the receiver? What does that say about the personhood of the giver?

We can’t separate “giving well” from “receiving well”. So that those who receive *anything* from us truly mean “thank you”, and that we can truly mean “thank you” at *anything* we receive. Seeing all things as gift.

Jesus Christ is the source of gift, giving, and giftedness. The Epiphany story reveals Jesus as the eternal giver, and the eternal receiver. He gives himself to life – to kingship, to priesthood – and he gives himself to death. So he receives all that is set before him. He is so pure a giver that he has never and will never obligate us, never expect anything in return, never be disappointed in us. He is so gracious a receiver that he will always be truly thankful, if we give anything to him, whatever we give him. Now that really is “giving well”.

And how do we respond to such generosity? Or to put it another way, “What can I give him, poor as I am?” Receive well. Receive God well. Receive *all things* as gift. That’s the greatest gift we can give.