

Which gifts for 2024?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 31 December 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Christmas 1B (Approaching Epiphany)

Isaiah 61: 10 to 62: 3; Matthew 2: 1-12

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Do you know the allegorical image known as *'The Vinegar Tasters'*? It is related to Eastern philosophies and may be helpful to reflect upon as we end one calendar year and begin another, particularly as today's Gospel reading offers us symbols brought to the Christ child from the East. For which gifts are we to offer at this time? What pathways are we seeking to tread into the future?

In the case of the *'The Vinegar Tasters'*, we are presented with three, typically elderly male, figures tasting vinegar. One reacts with an expression of sourness, another with a bitter, or stoic, expression, and the other with a sweet countenance. Chinese versions interpret this in different ways. Often however the three are related to Confucius, the Buddha, and Laozi (romanised as Lao Tsu), the founders of China's major wisdom traditions, and their responses are seen as reflecting key attitudes of their philosophies.

For Confucianism could be pictured as seeing life as sour, in need for rules to live and correct degeneration. Buddhism could be pictured as seeing life as bitter, bound up with suffering due to attachment to possessions and material desires. Taoism could be pictured as seeing life as sweet, being fundamentally perfect in its natural state. Thus, like the three gifts of the Magi, the wise ones, in the Gospel story, we have three particular ways of approaching life.

Each may offer gifts to each one of us: perhaps in particular ways at different times of our lives, yet each of them complementary. For another key aspect of *'The Vinegar Tasters'* is the interpretation that, since the three figures are gathered around the one substance, the one life, the one vat of vinegar, the great *'three teachings'* of East Asia are actually one. As an image of spiritual life and gifts in the Christian Tradition, the Gospel story of the Magi, the Epiphany, offers similar insights. There are also many aspects and pathways to tasting life through Christ. Yet they are not in competition with one another, nor, as represented by the Magi, are they necessarily at odds with the gifts of others. Rather, our Gospel proclaims today, in Christ, all things cohere and can find their fruition.

Today's Gospel story calls us to reflect upon the profound significance of the three particular gifts of the Magi to the new born child. For these are symbolic offerings, designed to reflect key features of Christ as a whole, and to lead us into deeper meaning and adoration. Indeed, this is why this story is called Epiphany. For, as the Greek etymology expresses, this is a 'revealing', and a 'theophany': a shining or appearing (phaino) of God (theo), the ultimate source and meaning of all things.

The three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, are not therefore incidental but revelatory. Indeed, they are intentionally placed so early in the Gospel text to help reveal the whole of the Gospel: not least in linking together the great faith and wisdom traditions, with the present and future, and the eternal, ultimate, presence of Christ.

The notion of the Magi as '*three kings*' is also very likely linked to the story's revelatory character. Three kings also fit neatly with three gifts, although the biblical text itself actually says nothing about the number of the Magi. It was later that each was linked up to individual figures, whom tradition then called Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar, and whose bones allegedly now lie in the Shrine of the Three Kings in the Cathedral in Köln in Germany. Indeed, those remains were reputedly discovered by Helena, mother of the first Christian Emperor Constantine the Great, on her famous pilgrimage to Palestine and the Holy Lands. They were installed in the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and later moved to Milan, and then, in 1164, to Köln.

All of which may, or may not, move us spiritually, depending on how trusting and/or honouring of the depth and breadth of Christian traditions we may be. Indeed, there are other traditions which locate the Magi elsewhere, including Marco Polo's 13th century record of being shown the Magi's tombs at Saveh, south of Tehran: a possibility consonant with the argument that the Magi might have been Zoroastrians, out of Persia.

Now I have mentioned that history deliberately, because it is, I believe, indicative both of the key significance of the Epiphany story in nurturing deep spiritual expression across so many different cultures, contexts, and centuries, and also because of the allusions to power resonant in the story. Those power allusions have led to arguments that the Magi were kings, on grounds of the nature of their gifts, their apparent capacity to travel and command respect, and the similar biblical giving of gifts by kings in Isaiah chapter 60 and Psalm 72.

Yet the word '*magus*' itself probably simply means seekers of wisdom, and astrologers, as in the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. This is the Old Persian word from which the word '*magic*' is derived, often used pejoratively: as in the Bible in, for example, in describing the objectionable sorcery of Elymas '*the sorcerer*' and Simon Magus in the Acts of the Apostles. No wonder then that Christian Tradition perhaps sought to emphasise what it saw as the healthier and more clearly authoritative titles of '*kings*'. Yet, as I said on Christmas Eve, "however it tries, this story cannot be easily straightened out!"

Let us however step away from the Magi themselves, kings or otherwise, to return to the greater importance of their gifts. For these are clearly intended by Matthew's Gospel to direct us to deeper spiritual recognition of the nature of God in Christ, the central and ultimate focus of the story. Whilst, later on, emperors and others may have wanted to align the Magi with kingship, and further link themselves with such power, the real issues about kingship here relate to Christ. For what is the nature of the gifts?

Were they, as some have argued, ordinary offerings given to a king: gold as treasure, frankincense as perfume, myrrh as anointing oil? Or do they carry further spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense as a symbol of deity, and myrrh, as an embalming oil, as a symbol of death? This interpretation goes back at least to the great 2nd century theologian Origen, and was picked up by the still so influential mid-19th century carol '*We Three Kings*'. This makes sense, particularly as it reflects the Gospel of Matthew's core concern to identify Christ as embodiment, bearer, and fulfilment of the great biblical and other ancient traditions of King, Priest, and Sacrificial Servant.

What profound images King, Priest, and Sacrificial Servant are! We are also inheritors of immensely rich traditions of spiritual depth and complexity which have arisen from them. The Epiphany thus represents an icon for our deeper understanding and spiritual growth. We are encouraged to let go of our ordinary selves, contemplate, and let it speak to us, allowing ourselves to be transformed by its gifts and insights. Now, for some today, that may seem too distant, perhaps too transcendent, and some of the images themselves problematic. Yet, in the spirit of the coming together of different cultures and outlooks, there are ways to use this. Let me briefly suggest three.

Firstly, in relation to the gift of gold, it may help to reflect upon it as a symbol of the ultimate Power we need to draw upon in our lives. That is what divine kingship, as revealed in Christ in Christian tradition, seeks to offer to us. Properly understood, this is also deeply subversive of other forms of power. If however kingship seems alien to you, think of gold as the Power of Love. For, as one year ends and another begins, we are again made aware of how so little stays sure, especially in our hyper-dynamic and hyper-stressed world.

Yet, in 2024, carrying forward past pains and disappointments, and continuing horrors, what do we need more than true gold, the eternal Power of Love in our lives? My sense is that, in our Churches as in so much of our world, we too often place our hope in insubstantial, or less than ultimate, passing things. Indeed, in the variety of its denominational forms, the Church will continue to die, and the world struggle, until it returns to its gold standard and refines its life. In a sense, this is akin to the contribution of Confucius to giving order in the experience of the vinegar of life.

Secondly, in relation to the gift of frankincense, it may be helpful to reflect upon it as a timely invitation to practice the presence of God more fully in 2024. For, in the icon of the Epiphany, just as divine Kingship represents true Loving Power, so frankincense represents spiritual Prayer and Presence. How will we then pray more fruitfully in 2024? It seems to me that one aspect of this may be greater thanksgiving, as well as continuing petition for our needs and those of others.

We live, after all, in a world in general which typically increasingly forgets how to give thanks properly and freely, fighting itself, and those within in itself, in an orgy of frustration and mutual despair. In contrast, a number of years ago, I remember being part of a church community which found new life in actively taking up the invitation of Brother David Stendahl-Rast to an intentional '*Season of Gratefulness*' - and that is perhaps one thing we might also explore here in 2024.

An abiding memory for me of 2023, for example, was how deeply moved our keynote Aboriginal speaker Charles Prouse was by the prayerful attention given by faith groups together to the reading of the *Statement of the Heart* in September. For being a cheer squad for progressive causes is not enough and we will run short of our own energies into our own despairs unless we keep drawing on the flame of holiness. Maybe too that is akin to Laozi's encouragement to give thanks even when you taste vinegar, for that is how life, and where God, is.

For, thirdly, in relation to the gift of myrrh, it may be helpful to reflect upon it as an invitation to Practice Love more deeply together in 2024. For, in the icon of the Epiphany, just as divine Kingship represents true Loving Power, and frankincense the Prayer and Presence of Love, myrrh represents the Practice of costly Love.

How will we then exercise that in 2024?

This brings us, I think, to reconsidering what Christian theologians have called 'kenosis': sacrificial love, and 'self-emptying': themes presented to us with fresh challenge by First Nations theologians such as Garry Deverell ¹ and by others. The Buddha called this getting off the wheel of suffering, via the path of 'non-attachment', and all of us struggle with this, in our individual and community lives.

What the myrrh of Epiphany symbolises is the need to make this central: seeking not only to avoid sacrificing others but also seeking to let go, or at least hold more lightly, our own obsessions. These, in Churches, typically include our buildings and our money (or perceived lack of it), our structures and expected ways of doing things. How might we then be transformed by the myrrh of change in 2024, and thereby better contribute to the transforming of the suffering of others?

To summarise: in the spirit of Epiphany and the love of Christ, we are called to open ourselves more fully to spiritual gold, the things which really matter; to the frankincense of prayer and spiritual presence; and to the sometimes bitter perfume through which resurrection comes.

Through the inspiration of the Epiphany, may 2024 therefore be a new year of kingship, priesthood and sacrificial service: a year, in other words, of true spiritual depths, greater holiness, and liberation.

And, in this, like the Magi, may we contemplate, practice gratefulness, and let go into God: joining with all, from whatever wisdom tradition who do the same, whether it is vinegar or wine we taste.

In the Name of Christ, and of Christ like light in many places. Amen.

¹ See ch 12 of *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (2023)