

# Sermon for Epiphany 1 – Baptism of our Lord

The Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21, 22; Matthew 2:11

There is always a bit of a dilemma at this time of the year. Two important observances on the Christian calendar coincide at this time. On January the 6<sup>th</sup> it is the day of Epiphany. Epiphany commemorates the first revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles (the non-Jews), represented by the visit from the Magi (those exotic visitors from the east, more commonly known as the three wise men). The festival of Epiphany originated in the Eastern Church (the Orthodox Church), where it at first included the actual celebration of Christ's birth, and was second only to Easter in its importance.

But at this same time we have the first Sunday after the Epiphany which focuses on the baptism of our Lord in the Jordan River. Epiphany means manifestation and it is at the baptism of Jesus where he is clearly manifested as the Divine Son of God. So, we are left with the dilemma of which important theme to focus on: the revelation of Jesus as a Saviour to the Gentiles or the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God in his baptism. Well, this year we can take the 'bull by the horns'. And given that a bull has two horns we can deal with both events, making comparisons between them.

Firstly, we have the Magi from the east who sought out this new king. They saw signs in the heavens that a great ruler had been born in the land of Judah. And so, they travelled hundreds of miles to present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts were indicative of the homage they were paying to this newborn child.

The gold was obviously a precious gift, representative of the worth the Magi saw in this child. The frankincense and myrrh were also historically associated with royalty. In the Old Testament book Song of Songs we hear both mentioned in relation to King Solomon: *Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant? Look! It is Solomon's carriage...* (Song of Songs 3:6-7). Gold, frankincense and myrrh were certainly gifts fit for a king. But in the life of the Israelites these items were significant for another reason. Worship was the lifeblood of the people and their worship took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. This was an elaborate building made according to the specifications of God himself. God was both the architect and the interior decorator of the Temple complex and he determined the way worship was to be conducted. And in Exodus chapter 30, we read of

three important items featuring in this worship: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The myrrh was used in the high priest's anointing oil which was used to consecrate the most important vessels in the Most Holy Place in the Temple (Ex.30:22f). The frankincense was used at the entrance to that same Most Holy Place to help symbolise the presence of the Almighty God with his people (Ex.30:34f). And the altar upon which the frankincense was to be burnt, and which was itself anointed with myrrh, was overlaid with pure gold (Ex.30:3f). So, these were fitting gifts for a king, but they were also items that represented the presence of God with his people.

These were very appropriate gifts to be presented to the child who was also known as Immanuel – which means, 'God with us'! We have no idea whether the Magi were aware of the symbolic significance of their gifts. But it is more than a little ironic that these non-Jewish, Gentile visitors bowed down and worshipped Jesus as king with the same items used in the Jewish Temple worship! Quite a significant offering!

And then some 30 years later we come to the baptism of Jesus. Even though only three decades separate them, this event in the Jordan River seems worlds apart and centuries removed from the visit by the Magi. It is hard to imagine that the two events occurred in the same lifetime. The visitors from the East seem almost mythical and unreal in comparison to the baptism of Jesus – as though they were mere phantoms in the night.

Far more believable and indicative of human nature is the incident at the Jordan River. The people in this instance travelled for miles to come and hear what John the Baptist had to say – but from the surrounding region rather than from an exotic land far away.

The response of the people was reserved and uncertain. They were waiting expectantly for something – but they weren't sure what. They wondered in their hearts if John himself might possibly be the Christ. On the other hand, the actions of the Magi in worshipping Jesus were far more decisive. And the people did not come to the banks of the Jordan bearing any elaborate gifts. They came empty-handed, unless of course you count the offering of their sin and their need to repent. Hardly gifts fit for a king!

But herein lies the unique nature of this king Jesus. John the Baptist indicated that Jesus was the one more powerful than he, the thongs of whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. But although he deserved all honour and glory and praise Jesus did not come to receive gifts from his people. He came to bring them.

Jesus does not in the first instance require us to offer him our wealth, for he came to seek us out in our poverty. Augustus Toplady, the author of the hymn *Rock of Ages*, recognised this truth when he wrote:

*Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling;  
Naked, come to you for dress; helpless, look to you for grace.*

Jesus our King comes bearing gifts more valuable than gold, frankincense and myrrh. He comes bearing a cross. He comes bearing our salvation. And having won for us our salvation through his death and resurrection he now gathers us into his kingdom and bestows on us his wealth through the gift of baptism.

As John the Baptist declared: *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire* (Luke 3:16). And when it comes to our baptism into Jesus Christ the gifts from the Magi can help us get a handle on what we receive through baptism.

Firstly, we have myrrh which was used to anoint kings and special items in the Temple. At his baptism Jesus was anointed by the Spirit and God declared: *you are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased* (Lk.3:22). In baptism, Paul told Corinth, God **anoints** us, *sets his seal of ownership on us, and puts his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come* (2 Cor.1:21-22). Our baptism therefore acts as our coronation. To the Galatians Paul wrote: *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ* (3:26-27). In baptism we receive royal robes of righteousness, fit for those belonging to the kingdom of God.

In addition to this, myrrh was also used in embalming. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to help preserve the dead body of Jesus (John 19:39). This acts as a good reminder of the death that takes place in our baptism. The old Adam is drowned and a new creation arises from the water. As Paul wrote to the Romans: *Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life* (6:3-4).

Secondly, the frankincense symbolising the presence of God acts as a reminder of how we receive God's presence in baptism. We hear in the book of Acts the call to: *Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 2:38).

God's Holy Spirit is the abiding presence of God received by us in baptism. As Paul told Titus: *God saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour* (Titus 3:5-6). We might not see a manifestation of the Spirit on us as Jesus did in the form of a dove at his baptism. But we do see evidence of the Spirit in us as we make our confession of *Jesus as Lord* (1Cor.12:3) and as the *Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children*, as Paul told the Romans (8:16)

And finally, the gold is symbolic of the precious and eternal nature of God's kingdom to which we belong through baptism. Martin Luther in the family seal he developed, known as Luther's Rose, had his seal circled with a ring of gold to symbolise that the bliss of heaven is endless and eternal, more precious than any other joy or treasure.

Through our baptism into Christ we inherit that eternal life. That is what it means to be sons and daughters of God through our connection to Jesus Christ. We have, in the words of the Apostle Peter, been given *new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for us* (1Peter 1:3-4).

So, there you have it, those who are baptised into Jesus Christ the King of kings receive more than they could ever hope for. Jesus was revealed at his birth as a Saviour to all the peoples of the earth. The gifts he received from the Magi, the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh, were really only tokens of the wealth that was to be found in him. And later, when he was revealed at his baptism as God's only Son, it soon became apparent how great a gift to our world he is.

We are baptised children of God. Our King has come to us through our baptism and he has come bearing the gifts of his kingdom. As Paul told the Corinthians: *Your body is now a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God. You are not your own; you were bought at a price* (1Cor.6:19-20). We are now gifts to the world because as a baptised, holy children of God we represent the presence of God in the world. May we offer our lives in service to God and to the world so that others can come to know and experience the incredible riches of God's kingdom of grace. Amen.