

9th Jan - Epiphany

Isaiah 60. 1-6 - Richard Hodson

Matthew 2. 1-12 - Debbie

The Magi - lets call them that - we don't know if they were kings or astronomers or something else. And we don't know how many - there were 3 gifts, but I expect there was a whole entourage - rich people, travelling for months, wouldn't go alone! But the Magi arrive, and even though they are not Jewish - they acknowledge Jesus as a new King. And even though they are wise with worldly knowledge yet they bow the knee and realise that they do not have all the answers - human knowledge can only take us so far - beyond that, they look for the light of God to show the way - the true light that came into the world.

And they brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh - but today I'm going to talk about incense!

I love this time of year, because you get to light incense.

You have to understand I didn't used to like incense - there was a church at the end of the road in London - the whole street would smell after their "high mass" - you literally couldn't see the altar if you went in!

But here, in St James - I found the little incense burner, and the incense and the charcoal, and I had a go.

Why do people object to it? Well like anything you have to get used to it - babies and food - don't say try this once, say - 10 times! We don't really like change.

But look - if we love God with everything - all our heart, soul, mind and strength - then why deny our sense of smell? We worship God with our eyes - in painting and architecture, with our ears - as we hear music, or the word of God, with our voices (not a sense) as we sing, with our taste - as we take in the body and blood. Even touch, when we used to share the peace, but also if sign ourselves with the cross, or for those who touch icons. But we resist smell.. Maybe you don't like this smell - but try to bear with me.

This smoke is mysterious - its goes where it wants to - like the holy Spirit - we can't control it, turn it on or off.

The smoke can be places where we can't see it - it gets into cracks and crannies - like God - invisible, but everywhere.

The smoke cannot be fathomed or understood - it can only be enjoyed - it asks no great intellectual rigour or leap of faith - it simply is, and we simply are surrounded by its presence.

Like Christ we are in it, and it is in us if we smell it and breathe it in.

It is truly a profound piece of theological kit!

And its not surprising that, like candles, its used by most religions - buddhism, hinduism, so its not surprising the magi brought some, for this new religious king - Jesus.

What may be surprising is that it may well have been the most valuable of all the gifts. The bible doesn't tell us the quantities of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but in Jesus day the frankincense and myrrh were worth 4 to 5 times as much as the gold. But of course values change.

People buy all sorts of things as investments - and sometimes they can lose a lot if it changes value.

There was a time when this incense would have been worth more than this building. Now, not so much.

There was a time when salt was the most precious commodity on earth - at least that's useful, unlike Gold!. The romans famously paid their soldiers in salt - their salarium, or salary.

(Come to church - learn facts!)

So here's a question - what has changed in value for you? Especially over the pandemic, - its often in losing things that we realise how important they were to us. So this last 22 months - what has seemed so precious to you? What have you realised was really worth something?

For me, one of those things, is relationships - simply meeting and being with friends, families, strangers - humans really are mammals - animals that like to live in groups and be sociable. Relationships are everything. I went to a funeral this week, my first curate, a guy named Andy - who tragically lost his life in a road accident - he was only 44.

I didn't take it because there were so many other clergy there - including Vicar Philip. I did expect to see Lewis there. You see Andy had so many friends and connections - he knew everyone - yes, even Justin Welby joined his Bristol Street Pastors for a night! He had 1500 face book friends - and when I was looking through messages I just kept seeing familiar names - someone I shared a house with in Birmingham in the 90's - someone I did a beach mission with from Lincolnshire - how did they know Andy?

Well, what was said time and time again at the funeral, was that for all his faults, and he wanted them talked about! - what he really cared about was people. He would spend time, he would listen, he would not always give the answers or try to fix things, but get in the mess with you. If he was late (which he always was) it was because he was chatting to someone on the way, he'd met someone.

So Andy reminds me, that relationships are really important. And we've missed that with all this distancing, and face covering, and not being able to spend time together. Relationship with each other, but also with God, with Jesus.

Because the maji brought the most precious things they had - gold, frankincense and myrrh, because they wanted to show how much Jesus was worth, and they put in not just money, but time and effort to come and be with him - to make a relationship.

And giving something its worth, is the root of the word "worship" - the maji literally worshipped Jesus by showing his value to them. Let us learn again how to worship - to express how much Jesus means to us.

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,[b] and have come to pay him homage.”

3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah[c] was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd[d] my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped,[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

60

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

2

For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

3

Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

5

Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,[a]
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

6

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.