

## Stewards of God's Gifts ...

*3 January 2010*

With the arrival of the Magi and their gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh, we become even more aware of the Gift-Giving aspect of the Season of Christmas. As if the weeks and weeks of shopping, Markets, wrapping of gifts ... and piles of presents under the trees, in the stockings, and in our bags at the returns counter were not enough to emphasize the gift-giving aspect of the Season of Christmas.

But the gifts of the Three Magi are different, aren't they? They are not the sort of gifts that we give one another. No one has ever given me a box of Gold ... although it is not a bad idea ...

No one has ever given me the embalming fluid for my funeral rites ... nor the incense of temple worship in ancient Jerusalem. These gifts from Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar ... are obviously trying to tell us something more about gift-giving ... and tell us something more about Jesus.

You've probably been told many times about the symbolism of the three gifts, but I don't mind saying them again: I think it is important for people to realize that much of the richness and glory of God revealed in the Holy Scriptures is found in understanding the symbols that are used in the scriptures: symbols probably very well understood by the people who read these scriptures originally.

Gold: is traditionally interpreted as being something that only royalty would possess. The fact that Jesus has been given this gift of gold would be a very clear indication that we should see him as "royal". And of course, our faith does describe him over and over again as either the Prince of Peace, the King of the Jews, or the King of Kings. We see him over and over again seated on the throne of Glory in the heavenly palace ... so this makes sense to us. I read one theory that says we should see the gold as the thing from which his crown should rightly be made ... instead of the thorns that he got .... And another, more practical theory that said the gold was to finance his flight into Egypt to avoid the murderous soldiers of Herod sent to Bethlehem to find him and kill him.

Speaking of death ... what a great segue to Myrrh ... the 2<sup>nd</sup> gift! We don't really know exactly what Myrrh was but we know that it was used primarily as an ointment for bodies being prepared for burial. It was extremely expensive and rare. It is certainly not the sort of gift one would normally give to a child. It carries dark overtones and brings us to a realization that there will be some tragic aspect of Jesus' life: I think we normally call it Good Friday ... Yes, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Magi was right and the gift was appropriate for Jesus in his capacity as sacrificial Lamb of God, whose very death became redemptive for the sins of the whole world. Was it that myrrh what Mary Magdalene was carrying to the tomb on the morning of the third day, when instead of anointed a dead Jesus, she encountered the living Lord in the Garden?

And speaking of Sacrifice and Lambs, we find another segue to gift number 3: the Frankincense. In reality Frankincense is a type of spiced up dried up tree sap, broken into tiny grains, which when put on red hot coals instantly bursts into a billowing cloud of really rich smelling smoke which rises with the heat of the fire up into the sky, leaving only a savoury odour, which would surely have been the most pleasant of all the odours found in any ancient city. But there is a real question about whether the intention of the use of incense was to make a good smell, or was it to rise into the sky visible as it ascends to the very heights where the ancient people thought God was to found. The scriptures do talk about it as being such a pleasant odour ... but they also talk about it as being a tool for carrying our prayers up to where God is. As the incense rises, so our prayers rise unto the throne of God. Jesus symbolically, through this third gift, is revealed to us as the One who offers prayers on our behalf ... offers the sacrifices pleasing to God .... And ultimately offers himself as the ultimate sacrifice.

I've always found the Feast of the Epiphany a day of great meaning because of these specific gifts. But the most important meaning for me is that these gifts are but the Magi's response to what they perceived as an even greater gift being given to the world: the gift of Jesus himself, given us by God. God gave the world Jesus; the Magi gave Jesus symbols of his future ministry on behalf of the world. It is not just gift-giving ... it is gift-exchanging ... between families and friends and between God and Mankind.

This exchange of gifts is so important that I have chosen it as the theme for our 2010 Stewardship Drive, which, by the way, officially kicks off today. For the next several weeks, culminating our wonderful Pledge Sunday

Pancake Lunch on the last Sunday before Lent, you'll be asked to think, pray, and act on the Gift-exchange that is happening in our own time and in our own church. [The Magi's gifts did not end the exchange. God still bestows gifts upon His people; and His people still respond with gifts in return.]

A Stewardship Drive, for those of you who might not be familiar with the term, is an intentional time for us both as a community and as individuals to ask "What has God given me for my ministry and my witness in the world?" And "What can I give back to God and to His Church to the enablement of that same ministry and witness?" For many people it comes down to money. And so, sometimes, Stewardship Drives tend to be seen as Fund-raising. But it must be more. Yes, pragmatically the pledges allow the Parish Council and the Treasurer to prepare a good, predictable Budget for the year. And that is important ... but the Gifts of the Magi were not pragmatic gifts ... they were loaded with symbolic meaning, and so this year, I really want to talk about Stewardship in terms of symbolism which reveals ministry.

How we do our Stewardship Drive has changed since I first arrived. In those days, nearly four years ago, we were operating out of fear and self-interest. We had to. We were in a situation where there was genuine fear that the parish might have to be closed. But God gave us gifts of boldly confronting the situation, and the People of God responded with gifts in return: Lots of Evangelism, and inviting friends to join our fellowship, lots of good spirits as we lived on the cheap, but didn't complain ... and lots of generosity as we saw our giving nearly double the first year. When we focused on what God was doing in and through us ... focused on His Gifts to us ... His blessings, and His joy, we found that our faithful response produced gifts more than adequate to our needs, at that time. Each year since we have tried to do the same: Focus our love, devotion, and thanksgiving upon what God is doing, and we find that we are doing more and more to make St. Catherine's a place where ministry and witness are making a difference from people from all around the world.

So, I'm not going to give you lots of budgetary goals, financial statements, or business like models for our Stewardship Drive. I'm going to focus on our stewardship of what God give us.

Next week: I'll talk to you about the Good News of Salvation, that God has given us, and how we are stewards of the Good News.

The week after that, I'll talk to you about the Ministries of the Church, Bishop, Priest, Deacon, and Lay ... and how we are constantly called to be stewards of these Ministries.

We'll talk one week about begin Stewards of our Future and how we seek to pass on the faith we have received to those who will carry the banner into the next generation and beyond.

And we'll talk about our Joy in living with and serving God; and how we are called to Stewards of the Joy as a witness to God's Love.

It may be a different sort of Stewardship Drive than you are used to. I hope so. But it is time to take this next step: because thanks to you and those who pledged last year, we have the freedom to move beyond the fear and self-interest; we have the freedom to move into a future where we are not threatened but emboldened to be even more; to do even more; and make an even great impact on our families, our neighbourhoods, our city, and our world.

I think that is what God wants. I don't think He has preserved this place through two world wars, several epidemics, the Great Depression, and the Cold War, just so we could have a nice little English speaking Chaplaincy ... I think He has bigger, more important things in mind. He has bigger Gifts to Give ... Symbols of his Love.

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