

As a parody of the old joke about buses, a cartoon Christmas card shows the Bethlehem shepherds, watching the approach of the wise men. 'Isn't that always the way?' one of the shepherds asks the others. 'You wait a long time for a wise man, then three come along all at once.'

In spite of the best efforts of the nativity play, we cannot put the shepherds and the wise men into the same picture. One group of visitors is from the Gospel of Matthew, the other from Luke, and they give us two very different Christmas stories. This suggests that neither Gospel writer is trying to tell us exactly what happened in a detailed historical sense, and in any case, they most likely did not know. So they are each telling us a story, a sort of parable (a *true* story, although which is not necessarily *literally* true or historically factual), to introduce Jesus, to identify both his human and divine identity right from the start, and to set the scene for main thrust of the Gospel.

If we look at today's story in the way the writer surely intended, we may discover its truth and meaning. The wise men or magi (in Latin, from where we get the word 'magic') suggest Persian or other oriental priests whose esoteric arts included astrology and the interpretation of dreams. Although Matthew gives no number, at some stage tradition has created three of them, probably because of the three special gifts they bring. They have even been given names, and turned into kings, although there is no mention of them having that status in Matthew's story.

Today's Old Testament reading is a likely clue as to how this later tradition began, and from where Matthew no doubt drew inspiration. The Isaiah prophecy declares that nations will come to God's light and kings to his dawning brightness. All people will come, 'bringing gold and incense and proclaiming the Lord's praises.' And Psalm 72 says: The kings of Tarshish and the islands shall pay him tribute; the kings of Sheba and Seba shall bring him gifts.' – a probable reference to Solomon, the great king of Israel, to whom kings and rulers came to visit, to hear his wisdom and to offer him gifts of gold and spices. As the Gospel will later proclaim, in Jesus, one greater than Solomon has arrived.

We read that the mysterious travellers, on finding the infant Jesus, opened their rich and costly gifts. Firstly, these gifts are presented as symbols of Jesus.

They reveal his identity. As the Epiphany carols love to explain, the gifts – gold, pure incense and myrrh acknowledge respectively the royalty, the divinity and the mortality of Jesus. The wise men represent the nations and peoples of the world beyond the Jewish homeland, including their religions and philosophies. We are being told that all of these will come to bow down before Jesus in recognition of his stature over them all.

Secondly, both the gifts and the givers are symbols for us too. This is our story. It represents our journey of life and faith. Gold represents our wealth, our resources. Frankincense indicates our devotion, our worship, our spiritual offering. And myrrh reminds us of our mortality and the certainty of our death. In our journey of faith, we place them all at the feet of Jesus. Having sought and found him we offer him all that we can and should. That is, not less than everything – all that we are, all that we do, all that we work for – our hopes, aims, ambitions, and also, in humility, our limitations. We can be sure that he will accept these offerings. As long as we understand that he will almost certainly want to make some changes, make them fit for his service, his work of transforming us and the world, and in the process heal some of our hurts, our weaknesses and shortcomings. As we draw closer to him it becomes clearer what things in our lives need to change.

We present our offerings and seek Christ's acceptance of them as we celebrate the Epiphany today. We come to confirm and renew our bond with him. This bond or covenant relationship is centred right here in what we are doing now. Our Christian Eucharist involves us in a process of coming again and again to offer our gifts, ourselves, our lives. We symbolise our self-offering, as Jesus did, with simple bread and wine, the stuff of the earth, and we offer them to the Christ. In Holy Communion he gives them back as the gift of himself to us, to strengthen and renew us in his life and love.

Today's Gospel serves as a guide for us on our faith journey. The wise men are shown as single-minded in their search and not put off by difficulties and doubts. When they find the Christ, they are overwhelmed with joy. They offer him their gifts. When we find him and offer ourselves to him, he helps us to open the treasures of compassion, generosity and love that so often lie buried inside us. Then we can offer those gifts to our brothers and sisters, our fellow travellers on the road of life.

Having visited and paid homage to Jesus, we read that the magi ‘returned to their own country by a different road.’ When we have truly found the Christ, we too travel through life by a different road, different to the one by which much of the world prefers to travel. We come to embrace different attitudes, values and goals.

Our Christian journey begins when we set out to follow a star – a hope, a dream, a light, in search of truth and meaning for our lives. If we search diligently, we find the Morning Star which never sets, Jesus Christ, the true light that enlightens everyone, and continues to draw everyone to himself. May we be encouraged and renewed in our relationship with him and in our call to follow him as we offer him the humble gift of ourselves today.