

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Epiphany Sunday – 3rd January 2021

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Anyone who has seen a child's nativity play will have seen three youngsters dressed in velvet robes run up by their mothers, with false beards and shiny crowns, arrive to see the baby Jesus. They will have boxes supposedly containing expensive presents of gold, incense and myrrh. In a big production they might even be towing a camel behind them. Tradition has it that they were called Gaspar, who was the king of Sheba and brought frankincense a symbol of worship; Melchior, the King of Arabia who brought gold for a king, and Balthazar, the King of Tarse and Egypt who brought myrrh – a more gloomy present signifying death and embalming. Gaspar wore a green cloak and had no beard, Melchior wore a gold cloak and had a long white beard, and Balthazar had a black beard and wore a purple cloak. In churches, the wise men don't arrive at the crib until twelve days after Christmas Day, giving them time to make the long journey following their star.

These traditions have crept in over the years – the Bible accounts just say wise men came from the East – no names, no details, certainly no descriptions, other than that they sought out the new King of the Jews. They were learned, educated men from abroad who must have studied the old Jewish writings and prophecies and added two and two together to such an extent that they came to see the fulfilment of so many predictions. As with so many traditions, the details that crept in over the years stand for something. Even the beards weren't just beards – the man with no beard represents youth, the man with the black beard represents maturity, and the long white beard wearer represents old age – so all ages of mankind were represented by these travelers. And of course they also symbolise us, the foreigners, non-Jews. They were amongst the first people to understand who and what this child was, and what he would become. The first Gentile believers in fact.

Epiphany and Christmas both feature gifts. Many people nowadays have lost sight of what the real purpose of Christmas is, in the consumer driven society of many parts of the world. It's all about buying and wrapping presents, putting them under

the tree ready for Santa or Papa Noel to distribute to the family on Christmas Day, and getting together with friends and family for a feast of food and drink and that lovely old word – carousing! As we've experienced at a friend's house on Christmas Eve, it can plumb the depths of over excited children ripping open every parcel and then flinging it aside to get onto the next. A far cry from the celebration of the true gift of Christmas, the gift of God's only son, born in a stable 2000 years ago. Sometimes, perhaps, we who think of ourselves as Christians also take this amazing gift from God in our stride, as if we have accepted the parcel and then put it in the corner rather than unwrap it. Or we have, like those grandchildren of our friends, unwrapped it and then left it to go onto something potentially more exciting rather than really look at it and see how it works.

Some of us aren't very good at accepting presents. It's like asking for help – whether it be from other people or from God – it's so often the case that we plough on alone until it becomes a crisis and we get into a muddle and we are forced to ask for help. We are embarrassed by receiving a big expensive present. Or by receiving a present from someone for whom we have nothing.

Rev Sue Goodwin had some wise words on this in her reflection last Sunday and made me think twice. She writes "A gift by its very nature is not a reward or something we deserve. It is an expression of love. (We can ruin this understanding by treating the gifts that Father Christmas brings as being rewards for good behaviour.) John, in the opening of his Gospel, points us to the amazing gift that God gives us in Jesus – the power to become children of God ... if we receive Jesus and believe in him then we are born again into a new relationship with God, an intimate relationship of father and child... We cannot earn it, we don't nor ever will deserve it. It is freely given out of God's love for us. All we have to do is receive it."

A gift made from love is something very special. How much more a homemade card or gift means to us than a mass-produced shop bought one. How many of us treasure things made for us by our children or grandchildren. Imagine then how much more God treasures us when we come to understand just what it is he has given us – our adoption by him as his children. As John says, "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God." Children usually resemble their parents – that's a huge challenge in itself if we are to resemble God.

For those of us stuck in that difficulty of receiving a gift without giving anything back – we need to know what it is that our father God would like. What can you give to the creator of the world? This year, more than many, we have seen just what he would like, as we gave to charity, raised funds for chickens for Christmas dinners for poor families who otherwise couldn't afford one, put together boxes of toys for children who won't have a tree and lots of presents underneath it, asked our families not to buy us presents but to buy a goat for someone in Africa to make them self-sufficient, sponsored a child in India, the list goes on. We heard over Christmas of a woman lowering down food parcels to the lorry drivers stuck at Dover, unable to get home for Christmas. Three young men in England have sourced and cooked 5000 meals for people all over the country from a pub in Leicestershire. People have checked up on elderly neighbours and made sure they had a meal at Christmas. In a village in Leicestershire neighbours turned out at 2 o'clock in the morning to put up sandbag barriers to stop houses at the bottom of the village getting flooded in Storm Bella.

We are now all one family, God's family, and as such we should look after one another. The best present of all for God our father is to look around at this enormous, diverse family and see it living in harmony, being kind and thoughtful to one another, making sure our brothers and sisters are cared for, have their share of the bounty of the earth, enough and more to eat, somewhere safe and warm to sleep. It's not down to him to do all that – it's down to us. With the pandemic still raging, 2021 will be just as challenging as 2020 has been, and we need to carry on praying for others and giving practical help wherever we can. Our family doesn't just need help at Christmas – it needs help every day. If we make any New Year resolutions, let's make them about helping others in whatever way we can. Phone that person living alone, give away our surplus clothes and things to charities, give our time, money and effort to those who have less than us, speak up against injustice, consider the needs of others – and let us be judged by our deeds, not our words.

Amen.