

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Epiphany
January 6, 2016

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The visit of the Wise Men to Bethlehem is surely one of the most romantic and beautiful incidents in the whole Bible. The story so simply told, with no embellishment, has lent itself easily to the imagination of writers, painters, and musicians. Legend has been busier with the Epiphany than just about any other gospel story.

We are told the guiding star sparkled more brilliantly than any other, and that the moon and other stars formed a retinue in the sky. We are told the wise men were kings and the Venerable Bede tells us the *names* of these kings and describes their appearance. We know Henry VanDyke's story of the "*other* wise man. Familiar to some is the Russian legend of the *Babushka*. During the Christmas season there are performances of Gian-Carlo Menotti's made-for-television opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. In December there was a new book for children in the Metropolitan museum bookstore. All these and more may not be true to the letter of Holy Scripture but art and legend contribute much to draw out the full meaning of the event.

Our sin-sick and cynical world makes its own contribution to the Epiphany story when almost everyone, believer or not, refers to *The* Wise Men. Don't you love the use of the definite article! Everything these Magi do flies in the face of conventional wisdom. They spend upwards of two years on a difficult journey in order to bring gifts to the infant son of an impoverished Jewish couple. It seems a foolish and minimal end for so big a personal sacrifice. And what did the Magi get as payback? *Nothing*, so far as the Bible says or the world sees. They certainly *gave* a lot! Yet these men who are only given names one thousand years later (and for whom Cologne Cathedral was dedicated) are called *The* Wise Men. Here is an exclusive club, and the membership has been permanently closed! Wouldn't it be fun to draw up a list of men and women of great accomplishment who would love to be included in the description "*The* Wise Men!"

Just what did these men do to prove their wisdom? From the time we were children we knew what they did. They brought gifts to the Christ Child: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. *Gold* is the tribute from our property paid to a king. If we are wise like the Magi, Christ is our king. And if we are wise like the Magi we kneel before Him

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Who “for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven” with His hands stretched out for your gifts and mine. Think of the joy of seeing a reflection of ourselves shining in the approving eyes of Blessed Jesus as we kneel before Him.

They brought *incense* to Christ. Incense is the outward symbol of worship of God. It is important to get worship right. Worship is an act of the will, putting you and me in right relationship to Almighty God. The Wise Men knelt before a child. But the child grew up and offered His life for the sins of the world. His perfect offering is the medicine that saves our fallen race. At every Mass Christ Jesus gives us the duty and privilege of joining in that offering. The Wise Men prefigured our assistance at Mass. Today wise men and women still take up Christ’s offer, worshipping Him in His perfect offering of Himself.

Then the Magi also brought *myrrh*. That is because the Christ Child would suffer and die. Part of the Gospel good news is that God knows human suffering as we do. And what do we do with our suffering? Do we bring it to Jesus and ask Him to join ours to His? Or do we go on isolated in a continuous grumble? Here is a gift within reach of us all, whether ours is mental suffering or physical pain, or disappointment. The Wise Men offered myrrh to One who would bear all suffering. They showed us the way we are to allow Blessed Lord Jesus to share the burdens of our lives. *Gold, incense, and myrrh*. The gifts seem exotic and picturesque. But these remote and mysterious gift-bearers are exemplars of the virtues essential to Christian living: service to our King, worship of Him as God, and uniting our sorrows to the Man of Sorrows. Christ Jesus is our focus, our emulation, and our end in life.

By rights the secular world should call the Magi crazy stargazers, or dismiss them as the stuff of legend. But the world still calls them by that definite article: *The* Wise Men. Cynicism gives unintended lip service as testimony that no one was ever wise as they. With the Wise Men we make our pilgrimage of faith. We are not armed any more than they were with incontrovertible proofs. And good intentions can also lead to King Herod! But with human reason recognizing the lit signposts of Christ’s revelation of Himself, and aided by the experience of the Saints before us, we have confidence and a holy hope we too shall “Behold the young Child,

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with Mary His Mother.” We too shall present Him the gifts we have been giving Him all along our way to the glory He has promised to those who love Him.