

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of The Epiphany
January 5, 2020

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With the account of the Epiphany you have just heard one of the most romantic and beautiful incidents in the whole Bible. The visit of the Wise Men to Bethlehem is so simply told, with no embellishment, it has easily lent itself to the imagination of writers, painters, and musicians. Legend has been busy with the Epiphany gospel!

For instance, we are told the guiding star sparkled more brilliantly than any other, and the moon and other stars formed a retinue in the sky. We are told the wise men were *kings*. The Venerable Bede, father of English history, told us the *names* of these kings, and described their appearance. Henry VanDyke's story of the "*other*" wise man is famous, and there is the Russian legend of the *Babushka*. Many of us remember watching Gian-Carlo Menotti's made-for-television opera "*Amahl and the Night Visitors*". The Wise Men are the subject of children's books you can find in museum shops and catalogues.

Even our sin-sick and cynical world makes its own contribution to the Epiphany gospel. Almost everyone, believer or not, refers to *The Wise Men*. Don't you just 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's a foolish errand at large personal sacrifice. And what did the Magi get in return? *Nothing*, so far as the Bible says or the world sees. These men are only given names seven hundred years after the event, and even later their monument is none other than the beautiful Cologne Cathedral. Still they are called *The Wise Men*. Here then is an exclusive club. 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!" Sorry, the membership is permanently closed!

So just what did these men do to prove their wisdom? Children know 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 "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven" with His hands stretched out for

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your gifts and mine. There is no greater joy than to see a reflection of ourselves shining in the approving eyes of the Christ Child as we kneel before Him.

The Wise Men brought *incense*. This is the outward symbol of worship of God. It is important to get worship right because it is an act of the will and it puts 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. So 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 Christ would suffer and die. Part of the Gospel good news is that Almighty 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 bitter grumble? Here then is a gift opportunity within reach of us all, whether ours is mental suffering or physical pain, disappointment, or grief. The Wise Men offered myrrh to One Who would bear all suffering. They are wise because they showed us the way we are to allow the Blessed Lord to share the burdens of our lives.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gifts seem exotic and picturesque, and not very practical for a poor newborn baby boy. But these remote and mysterious gift-bearers are exemplars of the virtues essential to all 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 still gives unintended lip service as testimony that no one was ever as wise as them. With the Wise Men we make our pilgrimage of faith. We are not armed any more than they were with undebatable proofs. And good intentions can still lead to King Herod! But when human reason recognizes the lit signposts of Christ's revelation of Himself, and aided by the experience of the

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Saints before us, we have confidence and a holy hope we too shall “behold the young Child, with Mary His Mother.” And do not come empty-handed. Bring the gifts of your life all along the way to the glory He has promised to those Who love Him.