

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh. Matthew 2.11.

Well, thank goodness it's all over – for another year at least! Let's get back now to some normality. But it's not quite over yet. The 12 days of Christmas may be over now, but there's still something left, something that is of supreme importance, something that the mad, consumerist world won't be spoiling for us, because they don't know about it. Everyone is back to work now, but the world doesn't notice that today is the feast of the Epiphany. The angel came to tell poor Jewish shepherds about the birth of Jesus. The Epiphany was when rich, educated *non*-Jews were given a revelation, an *epiphany* of Jesus. He's a great God you know! These astrologers were obsessed by stars; so God *used* their obsession, a *star*, to bring them from the east, from outside the Jewish world, to see the Messiah. So were it not for the Wise Men, these non-Jews, we would not be worshipping the Lord Jesus today.

The Wise Men from the east were rich, educated, cultured. They famously brought their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and it is these presents that I want us to meditate on this morning. Gold is an obvious gift. Frankincense, or incense, is, of course, used in worship. It was used in the Temple to make sweet the animal sacrifices (*Lv* 16.12) and symbolised prayer going up (*Ps* 141.2). And myrrh was an ointment used for holy anointing and burial.

If we look again at the familiar story in *Matt* 2 we see that the Wise Men do three things: they bow down, they worship, and they give. Only one of those actions would be familiar to our society today, worshipping, and even then, we worship the wrong things. The Revd Alan Mair spoke at our Joint

Service last Sunday of the great sin of idolatry, of worshipping false gods. We worship money, celebrity trash, all manner of –isms and false ideologies. Alas, very few today worship *Jesus*. The Wise Men also *bowed down* to One they recognised as superior to them. Today we bow down to *no-one*. *No-one's* going to tell *me* what to do! The Wise Men also *gave*, and gave handsomely. Ours is not a very *giving* age, is it? It's a 'Why-should-I' age. These Wise Men point us to a better way, a way of giving, of *for-giving*, of generosity of heart.

Let's look at the gifts. They gave gold, their hard-earned cash. As we start this new year I want to challenge you to give *your* hard-earned cash to the church, *not* so that I can go around in a big car, or have better holidays, but so that we can really serve the Lord. Isn't our church interior looking a lot better now than at the beginning of last year? New carpet, new lighting and heating, new audio-visual &c &c. and how was that possible? Because you generously gave your gold, and I want to thank you. And what is the result? When newcomers come for the first time, they find a well-cared-for church. Its warmth invites them to come again. I know a church is people not buildings, but it *is* a missionary tool. Who wants to come to a dowdy, shabby, cold uncared-for church? It's a turn-off! Your gold makes this place of worship what it is. We get no state hand-outs. If you don't give, we go under. If the churches close, no-one else will tell others of Jesus.

You give so well, but I want you to give more. God has really blessed us here at St Paul's, hasn't he? We're growing. But if we had *more* money, we could employ an assistant minister; we could employ a *youth* minister. Do you know what I'd *really* like? – an ex-BBC-type camera so that you could all see what the children are doing at the front. What couldn't we do for Christ if we

had more resources? The Bible speaks of tithing, actually giving a tenth of your income to the Lord. And why not? He gave it to you in the first place. Tithing is actually a spiritual act; you're acknowledging God as the giver and his claim on you. Turn to p962, to *Mal* 3.8-10 ... If we turn now to p1162, to 1 *Cor*8, we read of the tremendous generosity to the Christians in Macedonia, and they were *poor*! 8.1-5... What you do with your money, says a lot about your priorities, doesn't it? These Macedonians were putting the Lord first, and then others in their need. And if you look over in ch9, at vv6-7 we read how God loves a *cheerful* giver.

The point is that *God* is a giver. He *gave* us his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus *gave* his life as a ransom for many at Calvary. So we reflect *God's* nature when we give also, and give freely, lovingly and cheerfully. As we start this new year, may I ask you to check your level of giving? Don't give God only what you can spare, the scraps in your pocket. He is worth more than that. He deserves your *firstfruits*, your best, not what is left after you've seen to yourself. And, as I say, if the *Church* isn't able to tell others of Christ, no-one else will. It's a sobering thought!

The Wise Men gave their gold to Christ. They gave their *wealth*. They also gave incense. They gave a second W, their *worship*. When you come to church, it isn't to watch the Brian Hunt Show. You do not come here as consumers. I may *lead* worship, but *you* participate with hearts that really want to praise God. People get awfully hung-up about whether the singing is 'correct': hymns or 'worship-songs'? orthodox or 'happy-clappy'? Who cares? It's the heart you *bring* to the singing, the sincerity. Did you pray for the preacher before the service began? Are you singing to praise God at the tops of your voices, because you really want to give God glory, because you know

God is good and has blessed you? Do you know Jesus and love him so much, that you just want to give him all the glory? If so, then, get up and praise him! Again, it's great when newcomers come into a nicely kept church, but they don't want to see half the congregation asleep, and the other half haven't a clue why we are here, do we? We're here because we love Jesus, and we know he's a great Saviour. Worship should be hearty and lively and meaningful. And it should spill over to Monday in the loving way we live our lives.

And that brings me to our last W, our *work*. Those Wise Men *worked* to bring the myrrh to Jesus, the oil that would anoint his body. *His* work would be to give his life at Calvary for the sin of the whole world. The myrrh would anoint his body given as an atoning sacrifice. Don't separate Sunday from Monday. Do your work as though for God – your paid work, your housework, your work in church. Thank you also to all of you who work so hard in this congregation. Jesus needs you. *Col 3*, on p 1184, is remarkable, v22-24... So begin the new year by copying the Wise Men's priorities. Make Jesus your centre. Bow to him and give him your wealth, your worship, and your work.