

Gifts...

I'm finding as I age that I'm getting grumpier about the smushing together of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Thanks to rampant consumerism, Christmas has become less about the birth of Christ and more about the haul of material goods from "Santa" under a Christmas tree. It bugs me that society's focus is not on Christmas, but on Epiphany as THAT is when the gifts were given to the Baby Jesus. More on that in a bit.

The timeline of events is a bit, well, difficult to pin down between the Birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Wise Ones. We read about the Baby Jesus in the Christmas Gospel, and he is also referred to as a child. The reading for today is from Matthew's Gospel, as that is the only one which refers to the arrival of the Wise Ones. We are not told exactly how many arrived...only that there were three gifts offered.

We aren't told exactly how old Jesus was when the Wise Ones arrived. And yet, if we read further into Matthew's Gospel, we read of the Holy Innocents, are any of you familiar with that? It's a horrific story. The Wise Ones arrive in Jerusalem to talk to Herod and ask him where the child is who has been born King of the Jews. This terrifies Herod as he has declared HIMSELF the King of the Jews. He does NOT want competition...especially from the rightful King.

So, he sends the Magi to look for Jesus and implores them to come back to Jerusalem when they find him, so that Herod may go and pay homage. Except, Herod didn't want to pay homage, he wanted to kill Jesus, or let's be real, he would have SOMEONE kill the baby, or infant, under his direction.

We are not given a timeline for when the Wise Ones arrived in Bethlehem. Further on in Matthew's Gospel it says the Wise Ones were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so they returned to their own towns by a different road. Herod, eventually, realised they had been gone too long and were likely not coming back. And in a rage he ordered the death of all children under two years of age.

Let's back up a bit. Mary, being an observant Jew, would have known that for forty days after she had given birth, she would be considered unclean. Once that forty days had passed, she would present Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem.

She would also know that Jesus should be circumcised at eight days of age and it is believed this happened in Bethlehem. Now, according to Luke's gospel, Jesus was circumcised and named. (Luke 2.28, NRSV) There is no specific mention of Bethlehem, but logically, that would make sense. Mary would have been in no shape to walk back another 5 - 7 days so soon after birth.

It is believed that Jesus was presented at the Jerusalem temple, at the age of 40 days. This is also in Luke's gospel, that Jesus was presented to the temple in Jerusalem, as was custom. (Luke 2.29-32, NRSV) While there, the holy family met Simeon, a holy man who had been assured by God, that he would not die until he met the Messiah. When he laid eyes on the infant Jesus, he burst into song, what we know as the Song of Simeon.

There is no mention of any of this in Matthew's Gospel. Just as there is no mention of the Wise Ones in Luke's Gospel.

Let's go back to Luke's Gospel. The Wise Ones show up at the palace where Herod is, tipping him off (unknowingly) that the Messiah, the King of the Jews has been born in Bethlehem. They want to know the way. Herod, stifling his fury and fear, points them in the general direction then sends them on their way, asking them to let him know where this boy is, so he may go and pay homage.

When the Wise Ones do not return, Herod is furious and demands the death of all children under 2 years of age, which has caused scholars no end of concern as to when the Wise Ones arrived, and just how old Jesus was when they visited with their treasure chests.

The slaughter of the Holy Innocents is commemorated on the 28th of December. There is some scholarship which suggests that thousands of children were brutally murdered. The Syrian list of saints estimates the number of children martyred is 64,000. The Byzantine liturgy estimates 14,000 martyrs. This is not possible, given what we know about the population of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. In actuality, it was likely only between six and twenty killed in Bethlehem with another dozen killed in the neighbouring areas. Regardless of how many children were slaughtered, it was a horrific crime ordered by a demented and psychotic king.

Back to Matthew's Gospel. The Wise Ones come to visit Jesus in a house, or what was referred to as a home in Bethlehem. Jesus was born in a stable, not a house, so there is no logical way that the Wise Ones were at the stable when Jesus was born.

So Hallmark, if you're listening, can you PLEASE stop with the drawings on Christmas cards of the creche outline with the holy family, the angels and shepherds AND THE WISE ONES. THEY WERE NOT THERE! Here endeth this rant.

We are told that the Wise Ones came to the house where Jesus was with his family and opening their treasure chests they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Ummmm, now I know this happened a couple of thousand years ago...but still, these are weird gifts to give a newborn.

Gold, okay, gold makes sense as it is a universal currency that could be used absolutely anywhere. Gold would be considered a gift fit for a king, and these Wise Ones sought out Jesus as they knew he was the newly born King of the Jews.

The other two gifts are certainly not practical for a newborn.

Frankincense was costly and used traditionally in the temples by the priests. A gift of Frankincense was an appropriate gift for Jesus, the High Priest.

Myrrh was an odd gift. No record of using it to designate a king or a priest. Myrrh does have healing properties, and may have been helpful to Mary and the newborn baby, but they didn't receive this gift until at least a year after Jesus was born.

Here's where things get interesting. Mary is presented with gold, frankincense and myrrh. Today, this would look like coming to a Baby Shower with a Canada Savings Bond (are they even available anymore?), a small brass burner and cones of incense and a jar of embalming fluid.

Frankincense and myrrh were often used together in ritual preparations for the burial of a person. The more money you had, the more frankincense and myrrh you could use. We aren't told how much of the gifts Mary was given...was it one bar of gold or a chest full? Was it a small cloth filled with frankincense or several pounds? Same with the myrrh. One small container or many large containers?

And in Luke's gospel, after the Wise Ones leave, Joseph is warned in a dream not to take his family back to Nazareth, but instead, flee to Egypt. The gold could have been used, or some of it, to buy them safe passage to Egypt.

Did Mary keep the frankincense and myrrh? Because they would have been useful for Jesus when he was crucified.

Could the Wise Ones have known what was to befall the true King of the Jews? Were they giving Mary and Joseph a non-verbal warning? That speculation is best left for another day..

The title of this sermon is Gifts... and while we know the gifts that the Wise Ones gave Jesus, we often overlook the other gifts that were given to Jesus.

There have been lots of angels we hear about in the readings over this time of year. Gabriel goes to visit Mary, then Joseph, then the Shepherds. Other angels warned the Wise Ones and Joseph to go home by another road.

The angels gave Jesus the gift of introduction. Talk about a heavenly birth announcement! The Shepherds gave Jesus the gift of recognition. They came to meet this tiny baby who would set them free.

And then let's not forget Joseph, who was (likely) present when Jesus was born. Joseph helped bring the Messiah into the world.

Most importantly there's Mary, who gave Jesus the gift of life. She agreed to be the light-bearer. She knew that many difficult things would happen, and as well as hearing the wonder and joy of his birth, she kept these things, pondered them, and treasured them in her heart.

Think back to your fondest Christmas memories. When we were last at Rocky Mountain Village I asked the residents their fondest memories of Christmas and nearly every single one said their best memories were those with their families.

And so despite what the media tells us we need in order to be faster, blonder, fitter, happier, there is not a single object that can do that. No amount of eye cream, diet pills, fancy cars or gym memberships will give the best gift we have ever received. The gift of presence.

When Jesus was born he received the gift of presence from his parents. He was welcomed, or at least tolerated in the stable by the animals. The Shepherds came to meet him. No expensive gifts in hand. The Wise Ones arrived with strange gifts that had a hidden, deeper meaning. His parents could not buy him the baby bjorn, or fancy layettes. What's more, he didn't need them.

Jesus was born in a stable. Placed in a pile of straw, wrapped in strips of cloth and worshipped as any newborn baby should be.

His greatest gift, to us, is similar to the greatest gift we give to each other...the gift of presence.

And so, friends, I wish you a very blessed Epiphany. A time to slow down. To reconnect and to give thanks for the love, the mystery and the relationship we have or long to have with the divine. It's out there. You need only reach for it.

Amen

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