

A time of gifts

Sermon for Epiphany Sunday, 7th January 2024

Readings [Isaiah 60.1–6](#); [Matthew 2.1–12](#)

How many kings?

Three, you say? Well, Matthew's gospel does have a three, but it's the number of gifts that the exotic visitors give to the child Jesus – gold, frankincense and myrrh. He doesn't mention the number of visitors – and he doesn't call them kings. It's Isaiah this morning who speaks of kings coming with gifts (of gold and incense), while Matthew calls his visitors wise men.

He does have kings though, two of them: Herod the king and the one the wise men call 'king of the Jews'. Herod is a standard kind of king. He's all about money and power and troops, and he is averagely ruthless by the standards of his time. The Roman emperor was quoted as saying it would be better to be Herod's pig than his sonⁱ, after Herod had killed one of his offspring whom he saw as a threat to his power.

So when the wise men ask about the child, Herod sees another threat ('king of the Jews' is his job description) and Jesus becomes a marked man while still a child. In the very [next verse](#) after our reading Jesus, Mary and Joseph become refugees.

The present-day inhabitants of the region will certainly recognise this world Matthew sketches. He tells us that the Holy Family flees to Egypt; and the route from Bethlehem runs through the place which, then as now, is known as Gaza. Jesus is born into what is our kind of heartless world.

But what of Jesus' strange visitors? The wise men meet the two kings in our story, and they have a choice to make. To which king of the Jews should they give homage? To Jesus? Or to Herod, who is out to destroy Jesus?

Herod is a typical ruler, and they do not choose him; warned of the threat he poses they avoid ever seeing him again. It's Jesus for whom they open their treasure chests and bring out their gifts, and in choosing him they chose well. The kings of this world generally take more than they give, but Jesus will show God to be a different kind of king.

How different? With the wise men's precious gifts in mind, let's think about generosity. A story.

Once upon a time a good king and queen ruled over a great city. As their son's birthday approached, they invited all the young people his age to a party. The invitation was in four parts:

1. **Come to a Party at the Palace** (everyone was delighted)
2. **Please bring a present** (of course; it's a birthday party)
3. **Your present must be a container** (odd, but if that's what he wants...)

Then, in small print,

4. Your container must be made of gold

Well. People asked themselves what was the smallest container they could find, and the shops soon ran out of gold thimbles. But one young person, who really liked the prince, wanted to give him the best she could. She sold some of her stuff, did odd jobs for neighbours, saved and saved, and was able to buy a fine gold bowl.

When the day came, the party was wonderful. Great food, the best music, and a celebrity guest appearance by the new Dr Who. At the end, the King and Queen said,

Thank you for coming, and for your presents. Please leave them by the door as you go. But, before you do, go over to the treasure chests, which hold our presents for you. You can take home as much as your container will hold.

The chests were opened, and the thimble people ground their teeth, because the chests were full of diamonds.

We call Jesus our King because he is the human face of God. And the God we see in him is rather like the king and queen in the story. God gives more to us than we give to God. But God takes us seriously: God works with what we give, and God gives to us in proportion to what we give.

Give God a little, and God will work with that little. But if you give God only your bits of spare time, the small change in your pocket, the odd thought in your busy day, don't be surprised if the fruits are not great. Give God the best you can, and you might be amazed at what God gives you.

Generosity. Being generous, though, is not something you can just decide to be. Something must make you generous. The wise men give a clue. When the star finally shows them where the child is, we hear that they rejoice with great joy. So, in among our New Year's resolutions, let's each resolve to seek those things, those places, those people that might bring us joy. Because when our joy is released, then our generosity will be set free.

ⁱ [Macrobius, Saturnalia, 2:4:11](#) If Augustus really said this, his wit was well informed: as a practicing Jew, Herod was not allowed to eat pork.