

The Epiphany 2017

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks
Sunday 8 January 2017

The head at St Edmundsbury Primary School asked me to bless each classroom for the start of the year. You might be familiar with the Christian tradition of doing house blessings every Epiphany, at the start of the year: *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, 'Lord Jesus Bless this place': asking that the Lord Jesus, revealed to wise men, should be present to protect our homes and all who live in and visit them in the coming year - that we might know the person of Jesus, and the peace and the love that he brings in our lives in our families and the places we inhabit. So the children enjoyed seeing me splash holy water all over them and their teacher and classroom. You can imagine the reaction!

Just as you see in characters chalked on door lintels and door posts of many homes in Europe, where this annual house blessing is still a strong tradition today, so I left a lasting reminder above their classroom doors in chalk marks. If you're not familiar with it just Google 'Chalking the Door at Epiphany'. You mark the date (2017), together with the letters B-M-B. The children loved hearing of the dual meaning of the letters. C-M-B: Caspar Melchior Balthazar – or – *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*.

As the chalk fades and soaks into the wood and brick of the house, so over the course of the year, the prayer is that our knowledge of Jesus would gradually soak into our homes, into our families, our lives, that we would become more and more like the person Jesus wants us to be to those around us.

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What does Epiphany really mean to you as we celebrate this major feast in the life of the church?

As I was thinking about today I came across again the practical writings attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian order: a rule of life with real simplicity written into it. Five hundred years ago they had clocked already the *Christian Aid* notion in their slogan *Live Simply, that others might Simply Live*. He was very practical as well as a very prayerful man. And I wonder if one of his interpretations – of the symbolism of the three gifts of the wise men – resonate with you?

The gift of gold he saw as a very practical gift: the money could pay for the cost of food and shelter for the long journey, the flight to Egypt to escape Herod; money to provide a home and food when they got to their destination. And St Bernard asks: "Have you thought about your ultimate destination, heaven? And if not, you should: what do you need to get there? What metaphorical gold in your life do you need to carry you there? what gold do you need to sustain you, that you, as in today's Collect, may find your Journey's End?"

Then the gift of Incense: St Bernard saw as a very practical gift too: yes, the symbol of divinity, that most scriptural of gifts (which appears 59 times in the Bible) and symbolises our prayers rising to heaven, and the value and honour we give to God in worship. It's the smell which will greet us in heaven (according to the Book of the Revelation!) St Bernard said that the incense though also had a much more practical application, then and now: then it was to freshen the atmosphere of the stinking stable. And St Bernard asks: "Have you thought about how you are called to be incense in the world, to freshen the atmosphere of a corrupt, stinking, self-seeking world?"

I love the imagery that we are to bring a fresh smell into the world. Surely in this precarious-looking 2017, we as Christians need a fresh voice, to proclaim the good news of Christ.

As we reflect on two hundred+ years of progress, often led by or inspired by the churches, which produced wonderful world-changing things: such as the abolition of slavery, universal education for all (largely started by the church schools); a vast program of public works and employment rights (often started by wealthy Christian Philanthropists) which led to the vote, a healthcare safety net and universal freedoms protected by the rule of law in a Christian country: nothing half so ambitious is coming from churches today.

Surely we need to find a fresh, charismatic, attractive voice – to proclaim the good news of Christ: to proclaim for instance that the self-protecting, narrow nationalism, espoused at the moment by some populist demagogues, is not good news. Narrow self-interest, is not gospel, and will never be life-giving. “How will we”, asks St Bernard, “be like incense in the world, to bring the freshness and an atmosphere of Christ's love?”

Gold, and Frankincense – and the: Myrrh. Traditionally the symbol to remind us of the shadow of the cross, myrrh was used to embalm the dead. But again Saint Bernard's interpretation was very different and practical. Myrrh was used for medicinal purposes, and he suggested that it would have been used very practically to rid the newborn Christ-child from worms infesting his intestines, picked up from crawling on the stable floor.

And St Bernard asks “what a I doing to rid myself of the spiritual worms, the sin, as St Paul has it, which ‘clings so closely’ and separates us from God and neighbour. What addictions do I need to rid myself of in a New Year to make myself healthier in body mind and spirit?”

We need in our lives metaphorical Gold and Frankincense Myrrh! The Magi, when they leave their treasures with the Christ-child, they take away a treasure which surpasses anything they brought themselves. They take away the gift, in that Epiphany moment, of knowing who Jesus is.

They are enriched by the encounter with him of whom the angels sang, and they can enrich others with the truth of their own experience.

As 2017 begins, may that gift be yours: of knowing who Jesus is – and knowing what he calls you to do and to be in the year ahead.

Philip Banks, January 2017
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