

Feast of the Epiphany

A lot of times when we give gifts we are not sure how they are really being received. People don't want to appear rude or ungrateful for the gift and so they might offer thanks which appear real and heartfelt, but our doubt lingers: "Did she really like it? Will he really wear it?"

And then there are times when the delight of the receiver is so obvious, so unencumbered, that there's no denying that, at least this once, I did a good job. I hit the mark.

The Feast of the Epiphany is a good occasion to reflect on the reality of gift-giving because gifts play such a prominent place in the story. On the one hand we might wonder about the appropriateness of giving, say, frankincense and myrrh to a baby, but the story helps us to move past particularities such as age and location to reflect on the deeper reality of who Jesus is.

And from that perspective, all three gifts hit the mark. They present an understanding of Jesus' identity that we still do well to reflect on after all these years.

Gift-giving is a way that the invisible becomes visible, the way what is hidden in the heart is made known. The gift-giving associated with the birth of Christ is not really about material things. It is spiritual activity of the highest order.

It is an embodied attempt to communicate our spirit to someone we care about in such a way that they are built up by our presence.

When the gift symbolized a flow of love, it becomes the perfect gift, no matter what the material objects are.

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The gifts of the Magi are taken to be perfect gifts. On the one hand, they show that the Wise Men know who the child is. They acknowledge both the humanity and divinity of Christ and correctly understand his death as an act of sacrificial love.

On the other hand, the gifts allow communication between two interiors—the hearts of the wise men and the heart of a child. The perfect gift is one that carries one person into another.

A couple of years before my father died we kids went in together and bought him a new tool chest—the rolling kind where you put the big tools and which can hold a smaller tool chest on its top. He was so obviously delighted! I personally felt happy that I had hit the mark, and got him something that would not end up in the corner of the garage collecting cobwebs.

When he died, the tool chest had two screwdrivers in it. Even though he had firm plans all the way into the nursing home that he was going to “get those lawnmowers running,”—he spent his life working on engines and mechanical things—time ran out. No matter.

As I reflect on the experience now I realize that the gift was not limited to giving him something he would like and could use, it also embodied a lifetime of gratitude for all the endless hours of really hard work that he devoted to the life of his family, and his dedication to doing whatever it took to make it all work for us. The tool chest became a symbol of affirmation from us that he had done well. He had been a good and faithful father.

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I imagine that the gifts of the Wise Men contained something similar. They were not members of the Chosen People, but somehow their interpretation of the movement of the heavens brought them to understand that the king being born in Bethlehem was their king, too.

They were not merely observers of something going on in another culture but were being invited to be participants in the great work of salvation that was drawing in them and all the nations of the world and creation itself.

Why else would you make such an arduous journey? The gifts of the Magi are gifts in response to a prior gift: God's choice to draw all creation into the relationship of love that exists already in the Holy Trinity. This choice was made in the very beginning and God wants it to take place come what may—even if it means myrrh for his burial.

Our lives can be our gift, our effort to speak from our heart to the heart of God; to express our gratitude for what he is doing for us, not as an afterthought, but in line with his intention from the very beginning: creating us out of love, for the sake of love, and in the fulfillment of that same love.

He has written it in the stars and made it known in a baby boy in Bethlehem.