

Sunday, 5th January 2025, The Feast of the Epiphany
Matthew 2: 1-12
Fr Frederik Le Mesurier

In today's gospel reading, we hear of the arrival of the magi. They come bearing gifts – Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. These three gifts aren't normally on the wish list of new mothers. Perhaps it would have been more helpful had they come bearing blankets, nappies and wipes.

The gifts the wise men gave are not useful gifts. They are, of course, symbolic: gold is a symbol of kingship, frankincense, an incense, is a symbol of divinity, and myrrh, an embalming oil, is a symbol of death.

These gifts have a symbolic role in the narrative, to indicate this baby's destiny. But that isn't to say that literary symbolism is the only reason for gifts to be presented to the child, Jesus.

Throughout history, people have given gifts to God, in the form of animal sacrifice (or sometimes human sacrifice), or tithes of wheat, grain or vegetables from their harvest, or of money if they had such a thing.

These gifts, often made or left at an altar, sometimes, in the case of food, distributed to certain people, other times intentionally wasted or burnt, were offered as a thanks to God, a way for people to remind themselves that all they had – they had by the grace of God, and that it belonged first to God rather than to themselves.

We see this played out in feudalism, where there was a Lord who owned a great swathe of land, and the common folk (serfs) lived on that land and farmed on that land, and all they grew, they grew on the Lord's land, and so belonged to said Lord. Come harvest time, a certain amount of their harvest or their animals were to be given to the Lord. It was his due. A form of tax. In this sense, sacrifices & offerings traditionally made to God in a religious context are not so much gifts people make to God as giving God what he is due.

And, of course, God didn't get the dregs. God was to be given the best. The strongest and healthiest animals, the first fruits of the harvest, perhaps even a first-born son.... God got the most valuable, not the left overs.

But times have changed! We now live in a pragmatic, scientific society, where we can study cause and effect. We know all about the cause of rain, and it is not because we make appropriate sacrifices to God.

With our increased understanding of how things work, the old superstitions fall away, ... and life goes on. Turns out that God doesn't seem to mind that we don't bring our prize bull to be slaughtered at his altar.

Sacrificing things to God is superstitious, and the gifts of the magi were of more literary symbolic value to readers and hearers of the story than of practical value to God's self. So! ... Does this mean we don't need to offer any gifts to God anymore? And what could we offer God even if we wanted to? There's no item we could go down to the shops and buy that God would have any use for, and there is no postal address to send it too anyway.

But there is *one* thing – the most precious resource we have, and it is a perfect gift for God: our time.

Allow me to share with you some words from a book “The Listening Heart”, written by Sr Jeanne d’Arc (no, not THE Joan of Arc – but a Dominican nun who wrote in the 1960s...)

“It is precisely because our time is so precious that we must offer it to God. [...] Through the prophet Malachi, the Lord has forbidden us from bringing him lame or imperfect animals. He claims the finest specimens of the flock. The same is true of hours in the day; we must not set aside for God merely the empty hours which we cannot devote to any other purpose: hours of weariness or rest, time when we are travelling or waiting for something else. We can, and indeed we must, endeavour to fill such times with prayer, but they should not represent the whole of our prayer. If they did, then our lives would lack any sense of time being sacrificed – in the full sense of offering in sacrifice – to God. It matters little that we are not really capable of formulating pious thoughts or using fine turns of phrase. It matters little whether we experience aridity or facility in prayer, dryness or consolation. It matters little that we are weary or bored. It matters little what we manage to put into it - God puts into the time we give him what he will.

The only thing that really matters is that we should hand over our time, which is the stuff our lives are made of. As an acknowledgement that our life and our very being belong ultimately to God, we offer to him in prayer a tithe of our time, the sacrifice of a little of our life, of our irrecoverable existence.”

Sr Jeanne d’Arc continues with a prayer. It is a beautiful and faith-filled prayer, that anyone who has tried to pray - but found one's prayer life somewhat lack lustre – will be able to relate to:

“Here is my precious time, which I guard so jealously. I have nothing more precious to offer you, O Lord - and so here I am, letting my time run out before you, drop by drop, to no apparent purpose. This hour of my day, these sixty slow minutes which I have decided to burn before you: here they are, empty, emptied of everything for you.

I am ashamed to admit that I do not really know what to do with them, that I am here, rather at a loss, vaguely bored and pestered by the thought of all those things which I have deliberately set aside in order to give this hour to you; they keep hammering at the walls of my soul and I just do not know how to shut them up. Forgive my distraction, my awkwardness, my boredom.

With all the faith I’ve got, such as it is, I believe. You are pure act and you act in me, but at so deep a level that I am not even aware of it. You are love and you penetrate the substance of my soul, but in a manner too divine for me to feel.

I believe in you. I believe in your action in me. I pour out my time in this act of faith and offer to you as a libation this one hour, this irreplaceable hour of my life.”

Our time is something incredibly precious we can offer to God. We don’t need to worry that we aren’t praying “properly” or “well-enough”. Offering the time, devoting it to God, is enough.

Our time is both a symbolic gift: showing that God is Lord of our lives, and of all of our time, but it is also a practical gift: a gift God *can* and *will* make use of, if we dare to offer it. So we can follow the lead of the magi - we too have a precious gift that we can offer to God... If we choose.