

Matthew 2 verse 11

And they opened their treasures and offered him gifts - gold, frankincense and myrrh.

No Christmas presents perhaps have ever been so curious as the first three presented by the wise men. Some commentators have tried to explain the curiosity as a fulfilment of scripture, appealing to a verse from Isaiah “Kings shall come to thy light and nations to thy brightness; they shall come bearing gold and frankincense” though the myrrh is missing and has to be added from a bit of the Song of Songs, “One comes from the wilderness covered with frankincense and myrrh.” Others have pointed out that these were not kings, according to Matthew, but magi, that is, astrologers, and perhaps they were abandoning their magic arts by laying at the feet of the Christ child the tools of their trade, trance-inducing incense, golden charms and myrrh the basis of potions. Other commentators see the three gifts in a deeply symbolic way; this baby is to become King of Israel - gold, High Priest of God - incense, and the Suffering Servant of the Lord - myrrh.

Whatever explanation of these curious gifts you prefer, you must admit that from the point of view of the Holy Family they must have been something of an embarrassment, useless luxury items, when they lacked the basic necessities.

The Christmas crib has over time been embellished with all sorts of legendary accretions – the magi, as we have seen, become kings, and they are pictured as of different races – black, white and brown, and of different ages; and they are set opposite the shepherds, also old, young and middle-aged, and the shepherds bring their sheep and the kings their camels, with the “ox and ass who know their maker” added for good measure from Isaiah. The whole scene thus becomes an epiphany of the universal hope of salvation, all nations, all ages, rich and poor alike, including the animal as well as the human creation, worshipping at the feet of Christ. There is only one woman in this tableau, admittedly, but since she is at the very centre of it, she may perhaps stand in for the other half of the human race. There could be elements of historical memory lying behind all this, but it has been developed into a fairy story, which does not mean that it is not true.

And because it is Epiphany and we are allowed a little fun, let me tell you a couple of fairy stories instead of a sermon. They contain, I think some interesting parallels but the first is almost entirely false, while the second is true in the special way that only fairy stories can be true.

Are you sitting comfortably? (Probably not in this church unless you bring your own cushion) Then I'll begin. Once upon a time there was a king who was ordering flour one day from a miller, and to fill in a lull in the conversation the miller happened to mention that his daughter could spin straw into gold. It just slipped out somehow; he didn't expect to be taken seriously. But the king didn't see the joke and ordered the girl to be sent for and locked in a room in the palace with a pile of straw as big as a house and orders to spin it into gold by morning on pain of death. As it turned out she was saved from this terrible predicament by a manikin (I am using the Ladybird edition) meaning apparently not a fashion model but a midget. This manikin had the required skill but he demanded a heavy price, namely her first-born child. Well, she was in a fix; marriage and a family

were not immediately in prospect, so she agreed to the deal. Next morning with spun gold all over the place, the king changed his tune. He asked her to marry him. (When reading this story to my children when they were little, I always felt inclined at this point to offer a word or two of parental advice – that in selecting a partner for life, one ought to take proven character into account, and on that reckoning the girl would have been wise courteously to decline the offer.

A year later, the young queen was nursing her infant son, when in comes the manikin demanding his fee. She offers him half the kingdom to be released from her promise. But he insists on the letter of the original contract. Floods of tears move the midget to offer a slight reprieve. “Guess my name in three days,” he says, “and you can keep your baby.” As luck would have it on the third day one of the royal messengers sent out to scour the country collecting names came across a strange little man in a wood, hopping about, saying “My name is Rumpelstiltskin”. So, when he arrived that night to claim his prize, the queen was able to guess his improbable name; whereupon he stomped off in a temper and everyone lived happily ever after.

Well, they may have done but no thanks to this sorry episode in which all the parties come out equally badly.

Now I’ll tell you another story.

Once upon a time there was a king who was rich, cruel and cunning. He had usurped his throne and suspected everyone of plotting against him – his wives, their mothers and especially his children. Publicly he pretended to support the state religion, but what he really believed in was his lucky stars which up till then had served him well. One day a party of astrologers arrived at court and begged an audience. Hoping for a free horoscope he let them in and they told him that they had come to pay their respects to his new-born son and heir. This greatly alarmed him. He hadn’t had a son recently, and he didn’t have as many now as he used to “This is a plot”, he thought, “some young pretender of the old dynasty has just been born.” With these worrying thoughts running through his mind, the king smiled graciously at his visitors and helped them with directions to the traditional birth-place of the royal line in that country, on condition that, if they were successful in their search, they would come back and give him a name and address. Eventually, they arrived at a peasant’s hut where they found an older man and a young woman who had just had a baby, lying in a bed of befouled hay, amid the livestock. Disregarding these unpromising appearances, they asked for details of the family, and they learned the improbable name of the child – improbably common that is particularly for a royal prince. The astrologers, nevertheless, offered tokens of respect and decided, rather than try to explain the curious end to their journey to the king, that they would slip quietly away. The older man thought for a while and came to the same conclusion that it might be sensible to make a move in the morning.

My story does not quite end there. What was the man to do with the presents he had been given? If he was stopped at the border, he would inevitably have been accused of stealing them. So he took the first – a box of incense – and emptied it onto the fire, and the smoke and the sweet smell filled the air and bore his longing for the safety of his family up to

heaven. And then he took the second, a bottle of myrrh, and gave it to his dear wife, who sipped from it, and it eased her soreness and she fell into a gentle sleep. And then he took the third present – a bar of gold – and held it up to amuse the baby. It glistened in the fire light and the baby reached out a tiny finger to touch it - and just then, an amazing thing happened, it was instantly spun into the finest straw which filled the rafters and the feeding troughs and covered the ground with a soft clean bed to lie on.

And the moral of the story is this:

“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, he became poor for your sake, that by his poverty – by his poverty! – you might become rich.”  
To spin straw into gold is a cheap magic trick; it takes a divine magician to spin gold into straw, to spin the riches of his divinity into the straw and clay of our humanity and through one perfect life of love and obedience to show us the way to find real treasure, a loving obedient relationship with God our Heavenly Father,  
To whom be all glory now and forever.