

Isaiah 60.1-6, Ephesians 3.1-12, Matthew 2.1-12

Isaiah 60.1-6 The Ingathering of the Dispersed

⁶⁰Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Ephesians 3.1-12 Paul's Ministry to the Gentiles

³This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2.1-11 The Visit of the Wise Men

²In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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There is a legend¹ that tells of more guests arriving in Bethlehem, at the house where the Holy Family were staying, soon after the wise men from the East had left to return to their own country by another road. It goes like this:

The 'noble' visitors from the East had not been gone long, when three people approached the house where Mary, Joseph and the baby were staying. They came without any entourage, quietly/homely and unprepossessing. The first was dressed in rags, with a hungry, searching look. His eyes were hollow, having seen much suffering. The second walked bent over. His hands were bound with chains; sore after being worn for many days and having come on a long journey. The third had unkempt hair, a sad, despairing look, unsteady, searching eyes, as if he was looking for something he had lost.

The house in Bethlehem was surrounded by people, who had gathered for the child and the wise men. When they saw the three strangers approaching, they were taken aback and then formed a circle round the house, to prevent the strangers from entering. People started to murmur, and hostile grumbles were uttered towards the new arrivals. Then the door opened, and Joseph stepped out. He calmed the people and said 'Everyone is welcome to meet this child, whether they are poor or rich, miserable or noble, trustworthy or suspicious. The child isn't owned by anybody, not even us, his parents. Do let them enter!'

The three entered the house and stood in front of the manger. They looked at the child for a long time, quietly, thoughtfully. Seeing them there, no one could say who was the poorer: the child on the straw or the three visitors. All seemed bathed in the same lowliness: the one in rags, the one in chains, the one with the sad look and the child on the straw.

Then Joseph broke the silence. He felt urged to share his deep gratitude for what he had received with these poor creatures. In an alcove near the manger glowed the three gifts from the wise men. Joseph picked them up and offered them to the strangers: the gold he presented to the one in rags; the myrrh to the one with chains and the frankincense to the one with the sad face.

But all three of them shook their hands and heads, the first one replied: "I thank you for this very generous offer. But look at me – if anyone sees me with this gold, they will think I am a thief." The second answered: "I have become used to my wounds; I have become tough and strong. Keep the myrrh for the child; it will be balm when he finds himself with sore hands and feet." The third answered: "I come from the world of religions and philosophies. They've driven me crazy, and I don't believe anything now. I lost God in the desert of thinking. What would I do with frankincense? Fill me with empty pictures in its blue vapour? It couldn't replace God for me."

¹ Algermissen, Heinz Josef 'Dreikoenigslegende' in 'Moegde der Stern fuer dich leuchten', Herder Weihnachtssonderband 2005, pp.112-114

Then the three leant very close to the child and said:” You are not of the world of gold, myrrh and frankincense – as little as we are. You belong in the world of need and affliction, misery and doubt. Therefore, we bring you, what is both ours and yours.

The first took some of his rags, placed them on the manger and said: “ Take these rags. You will once wear them, when they tear your clothes from your body, when you will be alone and naked. Remember me then.” The second took one of his chains and placed it next to the child’s hand. “Take my chains. There will be a time when chains will be placed on you, when they lead you away. Remember me then.” The third bent deeply over the child and said: “Take my doubt and my God-forsakenness. I have nothing else to give. I can’t carry them on my own anymore, they are too heavy. Share them with me. Take them into your heart, scream them out; carry them before God.”

There followed a long silence, then the three stood up. They slowly stretched, looked taller, as if something heavy had fallen from them. They had found a place, where they could lay their burdens. They knew that this child would preserve it all in his faithful hands right to the very end: the misery, the affliction, the God-forsakenness. With hopeful eyes and firm strides the three left the house, stepping out into the world, knowing they no longer carried their burdens alone.

Pause

‘They left for their own country by another road’ – not just the wisemen, but these visitors too. Since that first Christmas – that first Epiphany – the revelation of God’s love for the whole world, we all can leave for our own country on another road, knowing that we are not alone; on the contrary, that we are deeply loved, known. Everyone is included. St Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, the last verse of our second reading today puts it like this: [11This was] *‘in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.’*

Through our baptism and faith in Jesus Christ – however big or small that faith may be– we have access to God in boldness and confidence. We walk ‘by another road.’ And the gifts presented to us in our gospel from Matthew today are our gifts, too, each year, each day:

The gift of the gold, is the gift of the divine spark in each of us, our uniqueness, our potential, our place in God’s designs – each one of us is a gift to those around us. That’s an amazing thought to think of ourselves as gift, from God’s hand, and our neighbour, too is gift. Can we learn to see ourselves and others in that way?

The gift of myrrh, is recognising that all of us live with hurts, wounds, longing for healing, trusting that these wounds, with God, will not destroy us, but enable us to be refined, become more human, more whole, mysteriously, who God created us to be.

The gift of frankincense, the offering of our longing, prayers and aspirations – we can offer those daily, perhaps especially aware at the start of a New Year, when many of us reflect

and reassess what is important to us. We are thankful for a God who knows us, sees us, loves us, guides us and gives meaning to our lives.

The gift of the child, who loves us, unconditionally, shares our humanity, gives us his light, each day, so we don't need to be governed by our darkness and our doubt, we can learn to trust the light that lives in each one of us.

Like the visitors in our gospel and the legend I told, who set off, continued their journeys, though by another road, we continue on our journey into a New Year, on that road with God. As the years go by, we learn it pays to travel light; it helps to let go of a lot of things. Let it go. Perhaps, all we need is the Gold of Love, the Frankincense of Longing & prayer, the Myrrh of Pain and the Abiding in Christ. That's enough. We will have all we need and we will arrive.

Amen