

Gifts
Matthew 2:1-12, Epiphany, Year A
6 January 2008
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

My mother will tell you that the greatest gift she ever received was a tin of Vienna sausages. You all know Vienna sausages: mini-hot dogs dunked in a briny, jelly-like liquid and sealed in a half-sized aluminum can with a peel-back top. Vienna sausages are not what one would normally think of as the gift to top all gifts. But this particular gift came from my three-year-old younger brother, the first year that my grandfather had given him Christmas money of his own with which to purchase gifts for those he most loved. And there was no one my brother loved more than our mom; she put stars in his eyes. On our shopping expedition, my brother paced the aisles of Wal-Mart trying to determine the most exalted gift to explain to our mother and to all those around just how much he loved and cherished her. And then, in the canned meats aisle, he found it. As though haloed at eye-level in front of him like, well, an epiphany, there were the Vienna sausages. My brother ate them several times a week; to him they were like little links of jelly-drenched heaven. And so, with the blissful ignorance of a three-year-old who has never heard of Upton Sinclair and has no idea in what a Vienna sausage actually consists, his tiny little fingers grabbed a can off the shelf to take home to my mother, the center of his world and the love of his life. I'd harbor a guess that each mother in this room would have opened that tin of sausages on Christmas Day and agreed that it was the greatest gift she'd ever received.

Today's Gospel is another story of gifts. On the day of Epiphany, which actually rarely falls on a Sunday, we read the rather mysterious account of three men in the East who find a star in their own eyes. Matthew doesn't tell from where these three come. In his parlance, "the East" intends to signify somewhere different and far away. These aren't from close by, in other words. Wherever it is from which they begin, a sign appears in the heavens, and the three feel compelled to follow it. The star leads them to Judea, where they consult with Herod the king. The three then continue on to Bethlehem, where the star in the heavens stops over the humble house sheltering a small child with his mother. "Little one," they say, "it is you who put the star in *our* eyes. We bring you gifts."

What the three then present may sound as strange to us as a tin of Vienna sausages. The wise men give the child gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The heart of this Epiphany story, like the story I shared of my brother's gift to my mother, is that the particular gifts of the wise men have

meaning far beyond what we, on the surface, can discern. The word “epiphany” means “revealing,” and in their choice of gifts the strange men from the East reveal to us just who this child is to them.

Gold is not a gift that one gives to a baby. But it *is* a gift that one presents to a king.

Frankincense—that sweet-smelling incense that is burned even to this day in thuribles before altars in churches just like this one—is a gift given to a priest.

And Myrrh is an anointing oil, a solemn gift given to a prophet, signifying that he is anointed to speak God’s word. It is also the oil for anointing the dead, signifying that the prophet is also almost assuredly the target of those who would deny God’s word.

King, priest, prophet. When the three men look at the child Jesus, this is what they see. Other than perhaps Mary herself, I suspect that few present in Bethlehem call them wise. Those who are closest to the little family look at the ragged child and his young, ragged parents—outsiders who have lingered in their town—and see a common example of deprivation, poverty, and want. But somehow the men who have come from far away with stars in their eyes see something different. And they reveal to us what they see through their gifts.

We do the same, for good or ill. In the gifts that we give to Jesus the Christ, we reveal who we see him to be. Let that sink in. *In the gifts we give to Jesus the Christ, we reveal who we see him to be.* On this Epiphany day, who is Jesus to us?

The wise men have gone great distances and upended the normalcy of their lives to kneel at the feet of Jesus. With gold, frankincense, and myrrh they have acknowledged him as king, as priest, and as prophet. And then they give him their greatest gift. Knowing that Jesus’ mission in the world depends upon them, they risk *everything* by defying King Herod. Rather than turning Jesus in to Herod, they leave town a different way. They change direction. As the sun does when one stares at it, the star in their eyes leaves an imprint they will carry for life, forming them into new people.

How far do we travel in our lives to kneel at the feet of Jesus? Do we set *anything* else aside, as the wise men set aside their entire lives, to make such time and room?

What do we bring him? Are our gifts perfunctory and frivolous, meaningless bobbles offered with little care or forethought? Or, do we set before Jesus the best of us: our passions, our love, our resources... all to acknowledge that *he* is king; that *his* body and blood save us; that *he* speaks the very voice of God?

And most importantly, when we look into the eyes of Christ, are our hearts moved to change direction? Do we stand up to those—even those with subtle or real power over us—and

begin to walk in ways that support Jesus' mission in the world? Does the star in our eyes leave an imprint for life?

It is traditional on Epiphany to baptize. Today we baptize William Nolan Jackson, and in so doing, we actually offer Jesus a profound gift. Today we—Will Nolan's parents, godparents, and all of us—will give this child to Christ and promise to raise and support him so that he is formed in the full stature of Christ. There is no greater gift we can lay at the feet of God.

The baptism itself is of course a gift *to* Will Nolan as well, and the act of baptizing today is only its beginning. From Will's family can be added the gift of love, a household in which words spoken in malice are not found and in which the child knows ceaselessly that he is cherished. From his parish can be added the gift of a community of grace, in which William learns what it means to live for the kingdom of God among brothers and sisters who share this commitment. But to live this way, and to give these gifts to this child, we must first *know Jesus*.

I mentioned earlier that those who were closest to the Holy Family in Bethlehem have trouble seeing Jesus for who he is. Sometimes that may be true of us as well. Jesus is a part of our culture and even our political in-fighting. We hear of Jesus and talk of Jesus so often—we are so close—that we may forget to look up and see that a heavenly sign rests above him. For us, too, as for the people in Bethlehem, the strange men from the East offer us a profound blessing in reminding us just who Jesus is. He is the king, around whom we should center our lives. He is the priest, through whose body and blood we are drawn close to God. He is the prophet, whose way of love can change our hearts and souls. This is who Jesus is revealed to be. And because he is all this to us, in the end we are the ones who have received the greatest gift.

Amen.