

The day that Jesus was born, Christmas, was the day that he was introduced to the chosen people, Israel. The day that the 3 Wise Men, the Magi arrived at his doorstep, Epiphany, was the day he was introduced to the rest of us, the gentiles; the day when we commemorate the manifestation of God through Jesus Christ to the whole world.

The story is so familiar to us; we have heard it from childhood. Sometimes with a bit of childish humor; after all how many of us sang, "We three kings of orient are, tried to smoke a rubber cigar"? Hopefully we also listened to the long and perilous journey of Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior from their homes in the East as they followed the star to the place where Jesus lay.

Then there is Herod the Great. Herod was from an Edomite family who had found political favor in Rome. His father had converted to Judaism and Herod had been appointed as King of the Jews by Rome. Herod was a brutal and inflexible ruler who only cared about Herod and would do anything to hold onto power.

We still blanch at the duplicity of Herod when he lied to the Magi as he tried to find the exact location of where the Newborn King was living so he could kill him. Failing in that task he went on to slaughter all the male children in the area of Bethlehem from newborns to 2 years old. The Holy Innocents who's Feast we celebrate on the 28th of December.

Then 2 dreams, the first to the Magi telling them to go home by a different route and avoid Herod. The second dream to Joseph who was told to flee into Egypt with Mary and Jesus to save the child's life.

A rather simple story on the surface, but as usual when dealing with the divine, there is so much more to the story than what shows on the surface. Lets look into just a couple of the lessons in this Gospel, rejection versus acceptance and the gifts.

At his birth, Jesus was accepted by the poor, and by the marginalized in Jewish society. I've always found it interesting that shepherds in the fields were told about Our Savior's birth, while the man who owned the stable remained clueless.

When the birth of Jesus became known to the powerful, Herod, along with the Scribes and the Pharisees that he consulted to learn the place of Our Savior's birth, rejected him. Men who knew the scripture, who were part of

God's Chosen People, who professed devotion to the God of Israel; who grew up in a culture in a religion that was seeking the Messiah rejected the possibility that this small baby was the one they were looking for. He was seen as a threat to their power, to the status quo, therefore, someone to be destroyed.

Yet, the gentiles accepted him. These Magi who were powerful in their society, well educated, widely traveled, but without the cultural inculcation of the Jewish faith recognized the Son of God made man. They recognized him even though they possessed many of the same physical trappings that were stumbling blocks to Herod, the Scribes and the Pharisees. They did not see the child, the Newborn King as a threat to them.

During his public ministry, the gentiles he encountered didn't rejected Jesus. The Samaritan woman at the well, the Samaritan leper who was cured, the Roman Officer whose daughter was ill; they all accepted Jesus. The poor and marginalized in Jewish society also accepted Jesus.

On the other hand, those who were in power, the son of Herod the Great, Herod, the Scribes and the Pharisees all rejected Jesus to the point of turning him over to the Romans to be crucified.

Look at our society today. The role of Jew and Gentile isn't the dominant factor any more, but those who think that they are powerful in secular society still have a tendency to reject Jesus, while those are not powerful, or who don't see themselves as powerful tend to accept Jesus.

Which brings us to the gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Not your normal gifts for a child or the parents. Gold is always practical, but how about some blankets, rags for diapers and maybe a cart to make the journey back to Nazareth easier on the new family? But this isn't a normal family and this isn't a normal child.

Gold acknowledges the humanity of Jesus. It is the material used to crown kings, and it acknowledges that Jesus is royalty, the King of kings.

Frankincense was used then as now in prayer. Frankincense acknowledges the divinity of Jesus.

Myrrh is a bitter perfume. It smells wonderful, but the taste can best be described as 'yuck'. Myrrh had several uses during Our Lord's time. It was used medicinally. More importantly for us, it was used to anoint Levitical

Priests and as a major ingredient for embalming the dead. Myrrh acknowledges the priesthood and sacrificial death of Jesus.

When we give gifts at Christmas, birthdays and other occasions we should not evaluate our giving of the gifts, or the gifts we receive by the amount of money spent on the gift. When we do, we pervert the purpose of giving gifts. G. K. Chesterton argued that; “gift giving is the way the invisible movement of the heart becomes visible.”

A truly valuable gift is from the heart of the giver, to the heart of the receiver. Gold represents the virtues of the Magi, principle among them being humility. Frankincense represents their prayer, and Myrrh represents their sacrifice.

Now that the wrapping paper is out with the trash, needles are falling off the tree and about half of the toys are broken or missing parts, what about our gift to the Christ Child? The Magi represented us on that first Epiphany, what should we be offering on this day when we commemorate that event?

How can we make the invisible movement of our hearts visible as they move toward the Christ Child? The Magi show us the way. We can lead virtuous lives starting with the struggle to learn humility and remain humble and continue through the rest of the virtues, practicing them every day.

Benjamin Franklin had a method for self-improvement where he listed areas in his personal that he wanted to improve. Then each week he would concentrate on an area, like ability to speak well in public. The next week he would try to maintain what he had learned the previous week and move on to the next task, like managing his money. He maintained this discipline throughout his life.

We can use the same discipline for practicing a virtuous life. First week, work on humility, the second week work on faith, third week work on hope and continue through the rest of the virtues. Always maintaining what we learned through study and practice the previous week, always going back to the start and trying to do better at each virtue as we rotate through them. We can try to make our lives golden in the eyes of God.

Like the smoke from frankincense, our prayers should rise to Christ every day. Prayers of thanksgiving, prayers for other people who need help and last, prayers for ourselves. Among the prayer for ourselves we need to

include a request for assistance in living a virtuous life because without that assistance we won't be going very far.

Then we need to accept the bitter taste of sacrifice. The myrrh in our lives. We cannot live a virtuous life without sacrifice, without changing, moving out of where we are comfortable because the only way to learn virtues is through practicing them in our daily lives. That practice will change us and eventually we will learn to enjoy the beautiful smell of the myrrh and pretty much ignore the taste because those small sacrifices will become so ingrained in our lives, we won't even notice them any more.

We don't get to stand still; it all goes back to rejection or acceptance, each and every day of our lives. We can move away from God by being totally focused on secular concerns or we can focus our hearts on God and move toward him offering our gifts of prayer, virtuous living and sacrifice.

So, in what direction are our hearts moving today?