

MYRRH

Three gifts to celebrate Christmas. Three gifts for the Christ Child. There are not three wise men – there are three gifts. And all of us can bring these gifts if we truly want to. It is one of the greatest blessings of the Gospel. Jesus never asks from us what we do not have. How many times He has had to remind me over the years! I get to thinking that I am never enough, and that I can never do enough or bring enough. But that is always Satan whispering in my ear. Satan is the Accuser. (Revelation 12:10) Jesus reassures, forgives, accepts, encourages. Jesus always builds bonds between us with what we *do* have and what we *can* bring. How wonderful, and reassuring, and encouraging – almost like He is the King of love and grace. The kind of gold (allegiance), frankincense (gratitude), and myrrh (we'll get to it) that is appropriate, we all have. Just like all of us have enough to purchase the pearl of great price.

With Jesus it always comes down to our willingness, never to demands we cannot meet. This is hard to get used to, or really believe, since all around us there are requirements, expectations, debts, and demands both seen and unseen. They drive us to fear and guilt and pressure and anxiety, until we can no longer treat ourselves or anybody else like we truly want to. Our world does not run on grace and love. It runs on Law – debts, guilt, demands, justice – and on the fear and anger that come from that. Even if we feel okay at the moment, we know that at any moment we may come up short – be found inadequate, insufficient, unworthy – and be cast away. The world even plays some of these themes on purpose, just to see if it can get a little more out of us. What a huge relief, what a huge gift, what a huge delight to shift to a new King – and a different Kingdom. If we know who this child is, we bring three gifts. We have them to bring, though mostly we have been bringing them to the wrong places and giving them to the wrong people. Oh yes! Among other things, Christmas is an emancipation proclamation. Whee – we are free of the old bondage! And to celebrate this freedom from guilt and fear, we even get generous enough to gift each other.

The Christian Way is more than intellect. But it is not supposed to be less. “*Worship the Lord with all of your mind.*” Worship also with heart, and soul, and strength. (Mark 12:30) I always thought that meant

all of them, all of the time, all of them together. I don't mean I *do* that, but I thought that was our desire and aim. I keep running into people who want to worship for a little bit with the mind, then put that away and worship for a little while with the heart, then put that away and bring out the soul, and so forth. And then put them all away for a while and go back to what they call "the real world." Then after a while, trot out the "with all your strength" part and go thrashing about to make things happen. Isn't that an interesting phrase: to *make* things happen? But we often try it, just in case it really is true that we get saved by our deeds, by how much we accomplish ... and not by love and grace. My mother used to inquire, with her own special brand of sarcasm: "Are we killing snakes today?" She did not mean "we," she meant "you," but that was how she put it. It meant I was expending enormous energy and getting nothing done, and had I noticed that?

The Christian Way is more than intellect, and Christmas is a huge conglomerate of thankfulness, allegiance, passion, and wonder. Like the Advent candles say: it is HOPE, and PEACE, and LOVE, and JOY. I know I do not present Christmas the way some of you are used to, or in the way some of you would prefer. In years past, some folk have accused me of being the Grinch. But I am the polar opposite of the Grinch. You see, Christmas has already *been* stolen, at least from most people, by the commercialism and trivialization and cynicism of our time, especially the cynicism that pretends to "believe" because of the custom, but not because of any life-changing conviction. Even lots of churches tell the story with no more life or imagination than this dried-out crèche scene. Too many people just go through the motions. But that is *never* enough! Each year, Christmas is for renewal – new insight, new power, new joy. The dimensions are endless, and even last year's wonder is not enough. On Christmas morning, we are going to wake up to the presence of our Lord more than to anything else in life. And everything else that happens will bask in that light and take on new depth and greater meaning because of it – because of Him: Jesus, Lord and Christ. Either that, or it means so little that it is a true insult to who He really is, and why He came.

May I remind you one more time: Jesus is not the Prince of "Peace On Earth." He is the Prince of "Peace between us and God." He is the Great Reconciler. Christmas symbolizes a new reality that is ours in Christ. Jesus did not promise "peace on earth" – not ever, not to anybody. Jesus did not have peace on earth Himself. He was

in constant conflict throughout His ministry, and He was crucified here, however hard that is to remember. Since Christmas celebrates His coming and all that He means to us – and since we call him the “Prince of Peace” – we need to be especially mindful. “Peace on earth” is a careless translation – a very misleading phrase. It promises a false hope and has a false aim. It will betray anyone who tries to believe it. What Jesus *did* say was: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” [sword = division] (Matthew 10:34)

Jesus also promised us that if we believed in Him and followed Him, we would have even greater conflict here on earth. “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*” (John 15:18) Yet every Christmas, I see the phrase everywhere – on cards and posters and in the music – and I hear it in conversations all around me. “Peace on earth.” But that is not the Christmas proclamation.

What was the greatest theological embarrassment of the early church? It was this: The Messiah was not what anybody expected the Messiah to be. Messiah was supposed to be a warrior/monarch in the line of King David who would come with physical might, defeat all enemies, establish Israel as ruler of the world, and usher in ... peace on earth. Early Christians were stuck trying to explain why they believed Jesus was the Messiah when He had done none of the things Messiah was supposed to do – when instead He fiddled around healing a few individuals here and there, and telling some really annoying parables. Then He made His bid for rulership without any army to support Him – and ended up dead.

Do you have any Jewish friends? I mean, Jewish friends with whom you can have a serious and honest conversation? Ask them why they do not believe Jesus is the Messiah. To this day, their final and conclusive argument is that there is no peace on earth – that if Jesus had been the true Messiah, there would be.

Well, much of the early church tried to cover this awkwardness by claiming an imminent Second Coming when Jesus *would* bring peace on earth. He had not done it yet, but after the added fancy footwork of death and resurrection, He would get with the program and do what we all wanted and expected of the Messiah, complete with battles, gore, judgment, and killing all the bad guys. No more of this grace and forgiveness stuff, and trying to convert and redeem everybody. At first they said

that this Second Coming would be at any moment. But when it didn't happen, they said it would take place within a few years. Then they said it would be before the current generation had died out. After two thousand years, some churches are still saying it: Any day now He is coming. He'll be here soon. Peace on earth is just around the corner. Love is just a ruse for the interim; let's get with the judgment. Nobody can tell us our idea of Messiah is wrong – not even Jesus ... or Easter!

Increasingly, the Christian Movement realized that Messiah was not what we expected – it was not about peace on earth, but about a very different kind of peace, and a Kingdom not of this world. And the purpose of Jesus' coming, at least in this world, was not the close of the age, but the creation of His church – an alternative WAY of Life in faith families spreading everywhere on earth. If we love Jesus, we are "His body" – His church here on earth. I keep hoping that more and more people will realize this and stop going for the big showy stuff. We settle in with patient endurance to be the church where we are – to honor our Lord in the way we go about our work, our relationships, our recreation, our caring ... everything that we do. We do it with humility. And some days are very frustrating. We cannot keep from being eager for a better realm. But true disciples sign up for the long haul – day in and day out, in season and out of season – faithful obedience for as long as God leaves us here. Whenever we try to impress each other (or ourselves) with size, glitter, miracle, or fabulous antics, it always turns out to be a sideshow. God does not have to impress us. Everything that is, or ever will be, has come from him. So God just waits for us to realize that we need and want to be with him no matter what it takes, no matter what the cost.

Intentionally or unintentionally, a lot of what passes for the Christian Message in our day is a lie. One of the big ones: He is not coming again; He is already here – as Holy Spirit. The next phase is not for Him to come back here in some physical way, but for us to go there in some grand and wonderful spiritual way. But that's another sermon.

Myrrh, like frankincense, is sap exuded from a special kind of plant. One form came from the Cistus, or rockrose, of Palestine itself. But the most precious myrrh came from Commiphora myrrha – a shrub-tree native to Arabia and East Africa, and imported at great expense. Myrrh was used for a wide variety of purposes: spice, medicine, cosmetics, incense, and perfume, as well as for religious purposes. It was one of the

ingredients of the anointing oil of the High Priest. Queen Esther used it for her beauty treatment. (Esther 2:12) Myrrh, pulverized into a fine powder and placed in a sachet, was worn between a woman's breasts, as we learn from the Song of Solomon 1:13. Both myrrh and frankincense are used as highly erotic symbolism in the Song of Solomon, which luckily none of you read anymore. You have problems enough as it is.

Why do the astrologers in Matthew's story bring myrrh? More to the point: In symbol language, why would anyone who is wise, and who recognizes Jesus' true identity, bring myrrh to the Christ? I mean, aside from the fact that it is costly? (Matthew 26:6-13)

Look out the window. Daydream. Think about the game on television. Do anything, but don't listen to me – or more importantly, to Matthew – from this point onward. If you do, it will forever ruin the happy, shallow American Christmas.

Matthew says that one-third of Christmas is myrrh. If you bring only gold and frankincense, you cannot have the real Christmas, wondrous though those gifts are. I know that some of you do bring myrrh; I hear it in the way you phrase things, and I see it in your eyes. But some of us do not bring myrrh yet. And without bringing myrrh, we are not a true church.

Myrrh is for embalming. Myrrh knows He will die for us – knows He will die *because* of us. Matthew's wise men know what Matthew knows. And Matthew has seen the full drama of Jesus' life on earth. Yes, this is the greatest birth of all time; they come to rejoice, pay homage, and worship. They also know He will be killed – that, directly and indirectly, we will kill Him. This baby is "he who must die." Not because God ordained it, but because we are too lost and frightened and angry and alienated to abide Him. He is born into danger, and He leaves crucified. That is integral to the Incarnation and to the meaning of Christmas. Messiah does not belong here. Though He is Son of God, and our true King, this world cannot tolerate Him, cannot abide Him, cannot stand Him – and most certainly will not love or obey Him. When deep in our souls we finally know that, we bring myrrh.

No one can fully explain, but comment is required. Matthew is working on an ancient formula. Jesus is Prophet, Priest, and King. Gold declares Him King. Frankincense says He is the great High Priest. Myrrh means He is Prophet. (Frankincense and myrrh cross back and

forth a lot, and are often used together.) But *this* concept of prophet is lifted higher than normal, as are the other two titles. The prophet's task was to turn the people back from their sin – their waywardness, their disobedience, their lostness – turn them back to being God's people. The prophet was needed because we do not keep the Covenant; because we keep going off track; because of our rebellion against and alienation from God; because the vision and the purpose keep getting lost or corrupted. Repent, turn, change, purify – that was the call of the prophet. Some prophets – like Jeremiah, John the Baptist and, much more, Jesus – realized that turning from one way to another was tougher than we normally want to see or admit. Breaking out of ruts, changing old habits, shaking an addiction – even the addiction of sin, which is trying to live apart from God – always takes us into some kind of death and resurrection. If we head into true forgiveness and redemption, such patterns get very real.

MYRRH DECLARES HIM PROPHET. Only, if He is true King and High Priest, He is also High Prophet. Jesus does not *merely* proclaim; He brings the change He proclaims. The word we use for that is SAVIOR. Jesus brings with Him a new dimension. A prophet shows the error – reveals the gap between what is happening and what is right – and then it's up to the people to close the gap and correct the error. But no normal earth prophet has the power to effect the inward change which is necessary. The story of human life on earth is that we *will* to do the right, but that we *cannot* do it. It is not just that we won't; why do we always pretend to be either better than we are or worse than we are? The truth is that we *want* to do good and be good, but discover that we cannot. It is thwarted, short-lived, or incomplete, or we get something changed only to discover that there is another hidden flaw in the new plan. Oh, we do some good here and there, now and again. But it is never enough. It does not flow with consistency and power. It is a rare day indeed when I go to bed thinking I have done only good, and no harm. Are your days so different? What can redeem ... transform ... change us from within?

With Jesus, the mix of King, Priest, and Prophet transforms into a Messiah higher than we ever imagined. It closes gaps we did not even know we had. Jesus not only convicts of sin, He reconciles us to God – He heals the very alienation that separates us. This Messiah is Savior. Savior goes to the depths, and cuts beneath all merit, all performance, all deserving. Savior loves and redeems us from the lowest

depths of our worst and blackest fears. Savior does not lead, or teach, or encourage, or try to persuade us to be better by trying harder. Savior goes to the very source of sin, the flaw in our relationship with God: the anger, animosity, and mistrust that keep us alienated from our Creator. Only, that means He must go to the core of death and Hell itself and carry us out when there is literally nothing we can do. God does not help those who can help themselves. Why bother? God in Christ Jesus helps those who *cannot* help themselves. Myrrh is for sin and death and the blackness of the Deepest Void – and myrrh is for the One who can deliver us, even from that!

How can Matthew pick a gift to represent such things? He chooses myrrh, and leaves the rest to the discerning. Frankincense, you remember, is for joy and cannot be used with the sin offerings. It is used at the beautiful, joyful, and most pleasant end of life's spectrum. Myrrh is used for the sin offerings, for purification rites, and for embalming. In short, myrrh is as holy and sacred as frankincense, only it is used at the hardest and harshest end of life's spectrum. Unlike frankincense, myrrh can go to the depths of defeat and death and evil, and all that we fear most.

Doubtless, Matthew chooses myrrh for other reasons as well. Matthew knows, and therefore so do the wise men, that myrrh mixed with wine was offered to Jesus as He hung upon the Cross. (Mark 15:23) He knows that Nicodemus brought myrrh mixed with aloes when he and Joseph of Arimathea came to bury Jesus. (John 19:39) (Nicodemus must have been extremely wealthy; he brought enough myrrh to bury half the Sanhedrin, which at that point he no doubt would have been quite willing to do.) In any case, it is quite clear that by the time of Matthew's writing, myrrh is associated with Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

As in all ages, and so in ours, the many cry: "Bring more frankincense! Away with the myrrh!" We want to be happy at Christmas. And Jesus would no doubt be the first to cheer, if that were the whole story. But happy about what? Happy about His coming, of course. And what does His coming reveal? First and continually, it shows the great animosity that exists between this world and God. What then do we do with the sin – the missed, the lost, the defeated, the broken, the betrayed? What do we do with the pain, the damage, the hopelessness? We only get to be truly happy at Christmas if we are no longer afraid of death and evil – that is, if we are among the redeemed

and forgiven ... and know it. So we bring both frankincense *and* myrrh. And Jesus accepts both. Down to this very day, Jesus still receives myrrh from those who bring it. Otherwise, the burden of sin and death mounts until we are crushed by it. And indeed it does crush us ... until we learn to bring myrrh to the Christ.

The great wonder of this Messiah is that He receives myrrh from us as a gift! That which is worst in us, He changes into great gifts. That which is weakness in us, He changes into strength. What we are most ashamed of, He uses to awaken us to love. From the depths of all we most fear and dread, He brings us to the heights of hope and peace. That is not just a fairy tale or a Christmas wish list. That is the biography of the saints for two thousand years now. And Jesus goes on saying: "Bring me your worst and I will show you how it has been warped, and I will reshape it into your best. I am the Redeemer. It is what I do." The darkest within us is also the highest. There is no way we can know that, trust it, or even imagine it until we learn to bring myrrh to the Christ ... in humility, and out of our deepest need.

Will you offer Him myrrh this Christmas? Myrrh for the One who must die for you? Hard to imagine a gift so unspeakable. "Dear Friend, highest of all earth-beings – You who are advanced even beyond my full recognition, beyond my ability to comprehend – put Your life on the line so I can finally know and believe that my life has significance. Prove Your love so I will know that my life is worth something. I bring You myrrh!"

Unspeakable ... impossible ... audacious ... WRONG. It is against every form of truth or justice we have ever claimed or known. But Matthew knows the Gospel, and claims it! "Die for me. You alone have the power to overcome all that I fear, dread, hate – all that I try to escape or deny. You alone can face it, and survive it, and rise again. There is no other hope. I cannot make it if You do not come for me – if You will not bring me with You – even through the depths of death and Hell. I bring You myrrh. And in return, You bring to me the grace that goes beyond death; the secret to life that lives beyond all disgrace and defeat and failure; the power of fearless love which turns into the freedom to live for You and Your Kingdom – even in this place ... even here and now ... each and every day. I bring You myrrh."

Let the congregation weep! And finally – and fully – rejoice!