

**Sermon by Peter Somers Heslam at St John's Church, Hills Road (Cambridge)  
Epiphany, 5<sup>th</sup> January 2020**

**Gospel reading: Matthew 2.1-12**

**'Opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh' (Mt 2.11b).**

He's the founder and director of a major toy company. And he's going on a flight to France with his bright and beautiful 15-year-old daughter, Natasha. She gets hungry as they await their flight, so he buys her a sandwich from an airport food outlet. As his daughter has a food allergy, he first checks the ingredients.

On the flight Natasha falls ill. Her father recognises the symptoms. It's her allergy for sesame seeds. The listed ingredients on the sandwich must have been inadequate. He quickly gives her two injections of adrenalin. The symptoms persist and Natasha is finding it hard to breath and undergoes a cardiac arrest.

By now, some of you, perhaps most of you, will recognize this story. It's received a lot of media coverage over the three years since it occurred. You will know that it does not end well for Natasha. But an important and intriguing part of this story only came to light a few days ago. That's when her father told publicly for the first time what he saw on that flight in the final moments of his daughter's life. He said he saw a bright light and several small angels.

This man's account of what he saw – available in full on [BBC Sounds](#) – would be easy to dismiss as that of a grief-stricken father whose life and emotions have suddenly been ripped apart. Yet this is a highly intelligent, rational, mentally stable, well-adjusted person who has proved himself a capable and trusted captain of industry. What is more, he has no religious faith or affiliations.

But he does now. Following his experience of trauma and 'epiphany', he began to go along to the local church Natasha had started attending a year before she died. A family friend of ours, who attends that church, has told us that all the members of his family are now fully involved in church life. They're on fire with their new-found faith, this friend told us, and this new faith is helping to propel their public campaign for better allergy-friendly food standards in order to save lives.

The tragedy remains, of course, a tragedy. But out of it has come faith and joy and social change. It has also given this family an assurance they now say they have that they will see

Natasha again. And it's already brought about a concrete change in the law – Natasha's Law – on food labelling due to take effect next year.

For me this story reflects in several ways the story of the Magi we celebrate today. One of them is that the characters are on a journey that is clearly spiritual as well as physical; another that a bright light, angels, and the traumatic death children are involved; another that Natasha's Dad, and the Magi, have an 'epiphany' - a revelation, a manifestation, a sudden perception or insight; another is that their epiphanies bring about a change of direction. But the most important parallel is that both stories reflect a God of wisdom and love who has given the world a gospel of truth and power.

Last year when I preached on the Epiphany, I claimed that in the twelve short verses of the New Testament that tell the story of the Magi we have 'the gospel in a nutshell'. This year I'd like to elucidate why I think this is by considering the symbolism of the Magi's three gifts.

### **Gold**

So, in the first place, gold. It's properties have captured the imagination of human beings for centuries. Paper money is so easily destroyed that when it was first introduced, people didn't trust it and many buyers and sellers refused to handle it. But gold is permanent and doesn't tarnish. Even unearthed Anglo-Saxon gold gleams like new. That's why, throughout history, royalty have been buried with it.

There's the clue – gold symbolizes royalty. So the gold the Magi brought was prophetic of Christ's kingship. But gold given to the infant Jesus signals the upside-down kingdom he had come to inaugurate; a kingdom in which *outsiders* – like the Magi, who were almost certainly pagan magicians and astrologers - are made *insiders*. A kingdom in which the mighty are not the Herods of this world but the poor and the meek.

This is reflected in one of the passages in the Hebrew scriptures that is evoked by the Magi's visit. In Psalm 72 we read, Kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. For he delivers **the needy** when they call, **the poor** and **those who have no helper**. He has pity on **the weak** and **the needy**, and saves the lives of the needy from **oppression** (Ps 72.11-14).

Issac Watts captures this in his wonderful hymn about Christ's kingship 'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun':

Blessings abound where'er he reigns:  
the **prisoners** leap to lose their chains,  
the **weary** find eternal rest,  
and **all who suffer want** are blest.

## Frankincense

The Magi then gave frankincense. This in the ancient world symbolized divinity. So the Magi are telling us that this king is also God – worthy not only of obedience but also of worship.

And as the smoke of the frankincense provided a sense of awe and mystery, it also represented priesthood, for it was only priests who could burn it. When they did, the rising smoke symbolized the prayers of the people rising to God.

So with the gift of Frankincense the Magi are also foretelling the *priesthood* of Christ – the divine mediator through which human beings would be reconciled to God.

## Myrrh

Finally, the Magi presented Jesus with myrrh. With this they prophesied his suffering and death, as Myrrh was used to embalm the dead. We know from later on in the story, when Nicodemus used Myrrh for exactly this purpose on Jesus' corpse (John 19.39).

Here we have the paradox of the gospel, and the stumbling block for so many throughout history and still today. How can Jesus be king; how can he be divine, if he suffers and is tortured, loses his friends and followers, fails to overcome his captors, and dies a criminal's death?

The visit of the Magi doesn't answer this question. But it does ensure that the story of Christmas – of *incarnation* – points to the story of Good Friday and Easter – of *redemption*. It's important that it does, as despite the importance we attach to Christmas, it's not the incarnation that the scriptures call the church to commemorate but Christ's redemption.

There we have it: gold, frankincense of myrrh, and what they symbolize. But why should we regard them as key components in this 12-verse 'gospel in a nutshell'? In what way are they good news for us today?

Christ's *kingship* must mean there's no area of life over which Christ is not sovereign, whether that be education, or politics, or healthcare, or law, or the arts, or business, or religion, or the world of science – all spheres of life the Magi are likely to have represented. We can operate within these spheres with confidence that Christ goes before us, and works through us to challenge injustice and promote the common good.

What about Christ's *priesthood* - how is that good news? It means that the way to God already stands wide open for us; that there's no act of duty or sacrifice for us to make in order to satisfy God; Christ himself has become that sacrifice. And he continues that priestly role today as he pleads and intercedes for us before the throne of God.

Finally, Christ's *suffering and death* – can this really be good news? It means that this high priest understands our own sufferings; and also that he has defeated death for us and has given a new life that will know no end and no suffering.

Christ's *kingship, priesthood and death* take us to heart of the good news – the good news that Natasha, and now her entire family, have discovered and wish to share, whatever the cost to their reputation or to their material circumstances. In the words of her father in his recent interview:

I don't mind if people think I am a fool, as I know it is the truth.(...) In my past years in business I have stood on stages with David Cameron and Gordon Brown, I was awarded an MBE by Buckingham Palace for services to business. Many of these things serve you very badly when it comes to building up arrogance and I had a good dose of that, frankly. I look back now and see it as all completely irrelevant.

Three years since his bereavement, he still has grief, but he is not a broken or unhappy man:

I am happy that I feel at one with God. We know we've been to a very low place – it couldn't get worse. But in that moment God has lifted us and carries us forward to bring about massive dramatic change to save people with food allergies from dying.(...) I'm compelled to tell what's happened to me in the most truthful way, without embellishment, so that others can hear it. That's what I feel called to do.

This man's epiphany on a journey to France mirrors the great epiphany of the Magi on their journey to Bethlehem. While both epiphanies are surrounded by the tragic loss of young lives, they both brought about *a change of direction*.

The same can happen for us today as we begin our journey through the knowns and the unknowns, the inevitable twists and turns of the year ahead.

Before they had found Christ, the Magi were part of Herod's jealous and murderous plan to bring violence and destruction. But after they had worshiped Christ, they were open to the prompting to return to their country 'by another route' (Mt 2:12). They went home *by* a different way and *in* a different way.

At the brink of this New Year, God is offering us another route, a different way, to some of the ones we've been taking this past year that we know deep down are not life-giving.

That way will lead us to safety. And it will lead us home.