

Sunday, 8 January 2017

Epiphany

St Andrew's, Cobham

Isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12.

The Importance of Being a Taker

As you all know, today is Epiphany, which is when we celebrate the revelation of Christ to the non-Jews, the Gentiles, represented by the wise men. The wise men were not members of God's chosen race – they came from an unnamed land to the east - and through God making known the arrival of His Son to them as king, we get the first glimmer of understanding that Jesus came to save the whole world.

Now, quite apart from this revelation that Jesus is for everyone, there is a very important lesson we can learn from the wise men.

I'm reminded of the old joke about the two women chatting where the one turns to the other and says: 'Well, I can believe in a virgin birth, but three wise men? – that's just impossible.'

I say nothing further on that score, but let's trust in the Bible and accept that it is possible. The lesson from the wise men that I would like to reflect on this morning is this: We all know what they *gave* Jesus. But what did they *take* from Him?

If we want to make progress on our spiritual life, then reflecting on this question is vital.

The wise men gave a great deal: gold, myrrh and frankincense for a start.

They also gave him everything it took to make their journey – time, money, hardship and danger.

But the most important thing they gave him was their worship. They recognized true authority and then bowed down to it.

In all of this they are a fine example for us to follow by acknowledging Jesus as our Lord and worshipping him, and by giving him our gifts of time, money and effort.

However... there is something missing here. It's not a complete picture of how to respond to God. In fact, it's a picture that reveals a real danger in our spiritual lives. This is no reflection on the wise men, who did all they could with what they had been given. But they had discovered just the start of God's plan. The full story of Jesus' life was to show us the full picture, and this one supremely important thing:

In our lives as Christians, the most important thing is not what we *give* to God but what we *take* from him.

What do I mean by that?

Well, very few of us like to take from others. Most of us prefer to *do* favours rather than receive them. Naturally we are grateful when someone helps us out, but we wouldn't like it to be a regular thing, because it makes us uncomfortable. We like to rely on ourselves, and if we accept too many favours, or too big a favour, we feel less strong and less independent.

And, unfortunately, the same thing applies to our relationship with God.

In doing as the wise men did, and giving our gifts and worship to God, we often fall into a spiritual trap. We start to focus on getting on the right side of God by behaving well, as if it's a contract where if we do our part, then God will do His. We try to rely on ourselves.

But this is the wrong way round.

Because God doesn't want us to serve Him; *He* wants to serve *us*.

He doesn't want us to *give* to Him; He wants us to *take* from Him.

In that little child in Bethlehem, He holds Himself out to us and says: 'My dear son, my dear daughter. I can see you are lost and afraid and need healing, and you are trying hard to please me. But the greatest pleasure you can give me is just to take this little child and put all your trust in him. After that, I will do all the work. I will do everything you need to be healed, no questions asked, and no payment needed. I will do it all, and it will make me happy to do it.'

In other words, God wants to do us an enormous, miraculous favour, because it would make Him happy. He wants to do us the favour of healing us. But to accept the favour means accepting that we do indeed need help, that we are broken people and that we can't fix ourselves. It means giving up all sense of power and self-reliance. And that is a very unpleasant feeling. So, we ignore His offer, or even if we do accept it, we constantly slide away from it and the old

idea of a bargain creeps in again, where we give God things and He gives us a pat on the head in return. When we do that, we cut ourselves off from God.

And so this is what we can take from the story of the wise men: whenever we find ourselves settling into the role of wise men and focussing on giving gifts and worship to God, we must stop and remind ourselves to take from Him instead. Giving to God is secondary. Taking from Him is the first and most important thing we can ever do in our lives.