## Reflection “precious gifts”

Matthew is the only Gospel to have the story of the wise men, the slaughter of the babies and Joseph and Mary fleeing into Egypt.

I am going to be talking about gifts and a little about the feelings and messages that they contain. This story seems to me to have some very strong undercurrents.

Of course there is the meaning of the gifts themselves

The three Magi brought gold, Frankincense and Myrrh to Nazareth to give to the child Jesus. Each of these gifts had practical as well as symbolic meaning. gold is a present for a king so represents Jesus being a king, Frankincense aromas have been used throughout time as aids for spiritual transcendence and peace, to manifest Heaven on Earth. Myrrh is looking ahead to Jesus’ death and burial when it was traditionally used to anoint the body.

These same three items were apparently among the gifts, recorded in ancient inscriptions, that King Seleucus II offered to the god Apollo at the temple in Miletus in 243 B.C.E. The Book of Isaiah, when describing Jerusalem’s glorious restoration, tells of nations and kings who will come and “bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord” (Isaiah 60:6). So as usual Matthew in particular is very aware of the traditions of the Hebrew faith as well as other legends.

Also as usual, essentially the same stories circulated in the different cultures, nations and religions at the time.

Matthew probably has another agenda: and that is that these wise men came from outside Judaism and actually from outside the Roman Empire. Right at the beginning of the story of Jesus’ life, non-Jews recognised him and honoured him, whereas Herod the Jew tried to have him killed and according to Matthew actually repeated what the Pharaoh did before the Exodus when he heard about Moses and ordered the slaughter of all the Jewish male babies. That fits with Matthew’s Gospel, for he really has it in for the Jews; maybe because he experienced their rejection of Christianity. He put in the saying about “may the blood of this man be on our heads” (Mt. 27:25) when the crowd cried out for Jesus to be crucified.

It could be said that Matthew’s personal pique against the Jews contributed to the persecution of the Jews by Christians over so much of history.

As an aside, the history of the very early church had it growing eastwards beyond the Roman Empire very successfully. Though we tend to focus on Paul’s missionary efforts and the eventual Christian centre of Rome, actually the first century of the Church was very much an eastern movement. In general Christianity over its first few centuries seems to have been accepted in the East and sporadically heavily persecuted in the West. The emperor Constantine and the rise of Islam changed all that.

Anyway sufficient to say that Matthew’s story about the wise men is typical of all gift giving; there is a whole lot more to it than the actual gifts.

My first observation links Matthew’s story and today’s reality. It is that Matthew had gifts given to a baby because he was destined to become famous. That never happens today for obvious reasons (we can’t predict the future). We give presents to babies of parents who are famous; for example Neve’s woolly hat in the exhibition in Te Papa. That hat was given because she was Jacinda’s baby. Presents are also given to heads of state by visiting representatives of other countries, and when ordinary people like us visit our friends we often take a present

There is nothing profound or biblically enlightening in the next things I will say, but it may ring bells with you. Now I will get personal about gifts, after all we have just had the season for gift giving and receiving.

When Linda and I send gifts or cards, it is actually Linda who usually sees things on special and knows when birthdays or whatever are coming up and buys things in advance and keeps them under the bed until they are to be dispatched. Though I help choose the present sometimes, and often wrap it. I sometimes get my fountain pen out and sign the card.

That is something that is very personal to me. When I was a small boy, just before she died, my mother’s fiancé was a member of the British aristocracy and sealed his letters with sealing wax which he imprinted with something that made an impression in the wax, like you see on some historical dramas on T.V. I would love to be able to do that. My peasant equivalent is to use my special fountain pen, so when I sign my name or write something to someone using that pen, it is special. When I sign a card to a grandchild “Papa” with that pen then it means “this is your grandfather and he loves you and cares about you”.

I will talk about a couple of presents. The first is actually this handbag I gave to Linda before we went to Egypt for our niece’s wedding. It was first of all because I thought Linda could do with a new handbag and it would be what she would like and it cost a lot more than she would ever spend. I wanted her to stand out with something that was proudly New Zealand. The funny story is that the bride’s mother, our sister in law took one look at it and said “you can’t take that”. She brought out a really stupid little silver coloured thing. We quietly laughed about it, it wasn’t worth making an issue of it and left the lovely bag at home, Linda took the silver thing to the wedding and when we started our flight home we chucked it in a waste bin in Cairo airport.

The second present I haven’t got to show you, because I have eaten it. It was fudge made by my granddaughter Ruby. She made it specially for me, and that means an enormous lot to me because she is a lovely little girl. That makes the point that if you love someone it doesn’t matter what it is they give you, it’s precious because it was from them.

I like things, I am a thoroughly materialistic man, but when all comes to the most important thing is the person who gives me the gift, for I look at it and then think of them. Our home has lots of things like that. This set of drills was given me by the Waikanae Beach congregation when I left. I think very affectionately about those people. I was fond of all the churches I was in, believe it or not, but that one was special. They were the only church I was minister of who never once gave me any problems I had to try to sort out. They were a dream for a minister.

Actually friendship has come to mean more and more to me and friendship is the greatest gift I could ever receive. Friendships are far more important to me than any material things, and I would think I am speaking for all of you if I say “A friendship going wrong is about the worst thing that can happen”.

Anyway concerning real physical things: We all get presents we don’t really like, sometimes because the giver can’t think of what to give us; giving things to old men like me isn’t easy, I laugh at socks or pants. With the exception of gifts like that fudge, the only actual things I really want are tools that cost many hundreds.

There are gifts we give all the time like our offerings to this parish or various activities that happen here, things like cakes to raise funds and bring extra enjoyment at Christmas.

What goes on inside us when giving and receiving gifts is as complex as human nature itself. And actually it is a good indicator of our complex nature.

So that brings God into it. Let’s start with what we give to God. I will start with me becoming a minister. God called and I responded, that surely is me giving my life to God? Do you really believe that? At best it was two way. It was rather like another little gift we have in our kitchen: it is these electronic scales. They are Linda’s scales for she used to have nothing that would accurately weigh less than 100g, so I got them for her from that Chinese outfit Aliexpress for all of $6.32 with free postage. However I love gadgets, they are fun for me to play with, and sometimes I also want to weigh things.

God’s call was like this: I was getting fed up with teaching; who wouldn’t when for the sixth time I would have a class of third formers who weren’t exactly desperate to get into maths. Linda said “you would really like to get into ministry wouldn’t you?” I said “Yes, but only if someone I really respect comes out and says I should. Next time I was chatting to our minister he said without any prompting from me “You should go to Knox and train”. Now if I had not wanted to I would have brushed that comment off and forgotten it, but it was what I wanted to hear.

And the reality of it was that I was very happy being a minister, it wasn’t a sacrifice at all, and though anyone who really knew me would have said “no way mate, you’ll never make a minister”; I muddled by OK.

I think we all give our lives to God in some way when we make our offering in a church service. To me it is liturgically the climax of the service and the cash and the food are just tokens or signs of that deep personal commitment.

I expect that all of you in your own ways that only you sort of understand; do what you do for others like for example support for the Living Wage, what we can do about climate change, and what we do for this church as a gift to God, however you understand God. And rather like those scales, it isn’t all one way for you probably get a lot out of it as well.

So finally, what does God give to us? The early versions of this reflection left out a huge gift because I didn’t think of it, which illustrates that I am not minister material. It is the foundation belief of Christianity. John 3: 16. “God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that those who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life”. Our faith has told us for 1900 years that the gift God has given us is Jesus so that we can obtain eternal life. I am not getting into this now for I expect we all have our beliefs around the significance of Jesus and probably more has been written about this and said about it than about any other subject.

However we understand God I think it is fair enough to say God gives us the stuff that we need to be good human beings, which I would say is eternal life here and now. The Christian scriptures as written by Paul, the author of the letter to the Galatians says in chapter 5 the fruit of the Spirit is [love](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love), [joy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joy), [peace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace), [patience](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forbearance), [kindness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kindness), [goodness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_and_evil), [faithfulness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faithfulness), [gentleness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentleness), and [self-control](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-control). They sound like a fairly good recipe for humankind to rub along OK and generally be fulfilled. However being personal again, to my ears they sound rather passive and over-good, if you know what I mean. I would like to ask the Spirit for a bit of courage, flair, risk-taking and adventurousness, drive and creativity, a sense of humour; and even a bit of anger in the right places.

I guess when we receive presents, even Paul doesn’t list all I would want as gifts of personality.

So in conclusion I don’t set much store by the financial value of gold, frankincense and myrrh and that sort of thing, but what counts is the love and respect of people in our lives and those gifts of personality that enable us to truly be alive. They are precious gifts.