

Costly Devotion – Matthew 2: 1-12 & Isaiah 60: 1-6
Sermon for Epiphany – 07 January 2024 (Rev Phil Wootton)

Epiphany can feel like an unnecessary left-over from Christmas. If you've been doing Nativity plays since the end of November, the three kings have been 'done to death' by now. However, the church calendar insists on slower progress. Taking time in January to reflect on the adoration of the Magi is perhaps the most important thing we can do in a new year.



Let's look at a picture: *The Adoration of the Kings* (1510-15) by Jan Gossaert. There's a lot to look at, so take a moment to take it in. So long as you don't expect it to be literally as it was in 1st century Bethlehem, there's plenty to get out of it. In the centre, the Virgin Mary in her characteristic blue, holds in one hand the naked Christ-child, and in the other a golden cup. Next to her kneels the first of the Wise Men in a brown cloak, having just presented his gift of gold. The other two are on either side: the one on the left is dressed in gold with a scarlet cloak, white scarf, leather boots and a crown; while the one on the right is in green, with a golden cloak, and red hat and trousers. Both hold highly ornate objects, containing their gifts of frankincense and myrrh, offerings to the infant King. Around them stand their retinues of attendants, some more engaged than others. Behind are Joseph (in red) and some half-hidden shepherds. Above hovers the angelic host, all in bright robes.

Looking at this picture, I am struck by three contrasts:

First, in contrast with all the bright colours and fine fabrics, the setting is one of ruin and dilapidation. They're inside a once grand building – a palace or a temple – but the roof's fallen in, the walls are crumbling, the tiles are coming up. The dogs at the front, usually a symbol of faithfulness, are half-starved and looking to scavenge what they can. This is the end of an age: the Roman pagan past is coming to an end. With Christ's birth a new age is dawning, a new dispensation in world history.

The second contrast is between the activity towards the edges of the picture and the stillness at its centre. Above, angel-wings whirl. To left and right, attendants shuffle, look away, talk to one another, or else strain for a better view. Behind, shepherds seem to hide themselves behind pillars. In front, dogs snuffle around. But at the heart of the picture, the child is still. His mother is serene, her eyes fixed on him. The first of the Wise Men kneels, hatless, his hands together in prayer, his eyes intent on the One who is the end of their quest. All need movement and activity, of course, to pursue our callings, but at the heart of the matter is adoration of the One who has come to share our life and that of all humanity.

The third contrast, returns to the finery of the robes, the exquisite fabrics, the ornate gifts, that's in stark opposition to the nakedness of the Christ-child. Sitting on his mother's lap, he is seen in all his humanity, his human vulnerability. He is the focus of all the attention. He is, by rights, Lord of all he surveys, and yet as a baby has no power to compel. All a baby can do is elicit a response. To survive, a baby must call forth love from those on whom he depends. This is how God comes into the world, dependent on precarious human love. The Wise Men are amongst the first to respond, and as the hymn reminds us, it was with 'costly devotion' they showed their adoration to the new King.

At the start of 2024, it's probably that sense that the world is falling apart with which we can most easily identify. The on-going war in Ukraine, the appalling destruction of lives in Gaza and southern Israel, drone attacks on shipping, and so much more that goes largely unreported, all give us little confidence of a better year ahead. It's been reported that in 2024 more people will go to the polls to elect leaders or governments than ever before, with elections not only in this country, but in USA, India and Russia amongst many others. But simply by naming those countries we can say immediately this is scarcely the triumph of democracy we might hope for. On the environmental front, whilst there is some good news in terms of protections and species coming back from the brink of extinction, humanity is still unacceptably and unsustainably raising the temperature of the planet: the rise in extreme weather events gives evidence of the world falling apart.

The Advent reflections I led last month concluded by Wise Men's gifts as symbols reminding us about the actions we might take to care for God's planet better, challenging ourselves with these as our 'costly devotions:'

Gold is the symbol of money, so how do we use ours? With our giving, do we include environmental charities as well as ones like Christian Aid and Tearfund that are involved with dealing with the consequences of climate change on already marginalised peoples? In banking: Have we considered moving our bank accounts from the big banks to those with better green credentials? When we exercise economic choices in our shopping, do we think about food miles, packaging, sustainability and similar issues?

Myrrh is a symbol of death, and our Western life-styles can be said to be killing the planet. So, can we keep in the forefront of our minds, and highlight with others, possible lifestyle changes for the health of the planet? Food – the great over-indulgence of Christmas! Can we reduce meat intake, especially of beef and lamb? Or buy organic, out-door reared or otherwise sustainable farm foods? Can we eliminate food-waste? At home – can we reduce, re-use, recycle? can we improve efficiency with draughtproofing, insulation, LED bulbs, appliances with high efficiency ratings? Lower thermostat temperatures? Switch to low-carbon heating systems? Travel – can we walk, cycle or use public transport? Minimise flying? Make the next car an electric?

Frankincense is the symbol worship. Worship should ensure our Christian environmental concern does not become moralising and telling people off, but is filled with thanksgiving for the world God has given us. In busy lives, that means we need to make time to contemplate creation, and the Creator, and express our response in worship. At the same time, can we make 2024 a year we move forward with making our churches more environmentally friendly and improve our status as eco-churches?

So, can we come to the Child at the heart of it all, and make our devotions, our 'costly devotions' afresh this year? Jan Gossaert's picture was originally an altarpiece, so you would see it as you come forward to receive Communion. The gift of gold, presented by the kneeling wise man, is in the shape of a cup, a chalice, and Christ has his hand outstretched to it, as if giving his blessing on it and on all who receive. We come with our devotions, perhaps thinking how much we are giving, whether in money, or time, or energy, or changed habits. Then we realise we have come to the One who is God, who has given his all to take our flesh. We find we receive infinitely more than we can possibly give. We have come to the One who is the end of our journeying, as well as the source of our life. We have met with the One who is joy beyond knowing, life without end.