

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	4 January 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Epiphany
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

On entering the house, the wise men saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

I'd like to offer this morning some reflection on the gifts brought by the wise men to Jesus at his Epiphany.

At Pallant House Gallery, there is currently a wonderful exhibition of the work of the early twentieth century painter William Nicholson. He painted all sorts of things, including portraits, landscapes and children's illustrations but perhaps his most striking works are in a genre that was little respected at the time: that of still lifes. But if you visit the gallery, you can hardly fail to be arrested by a prominent painting from 1937 of a gold jug. The way Nicholson has painted it catches the light, so that the picture glistens and sparkles. At first sight you'd think it was painted out of some lavish gold paint like in a medieval manuscript, but when you get up close and, as in my case, remove your glasses, you realise the complexity and ingenuity of it. Nicholson has expertly created the effect of a gleaming gold jug, but there's a thick streak of grey green in the middle and white paint spills over the top.

Extraordinary as it is, perhaps this remarkable painting reminds us that gold has an ambiguity about it and is not the uniformly wonderful substance it might seem. It's often pointed out that this is the most precious of metals doesn't have the normal qualities we want in a metal because it is so soft and malleable. In many ways it is pretty useless. I saw in the news yesterday however that the price of gold is predicted to leap in 2026 to almost five thousand dollars an ounce: an extraordinary and, as I understand it, somewhat worrying sign that we human beings place such an extraordinary amount of value on something that lies inactive in a vault. And does the baby Jesus actually want any gold? The wise men bring him this gift as a token of a royal coronation but the crown that he was eventually to wear would be the crown of thorns.

The second gift of incense is generally taken to symbolise prayer offered to Jesus' divinity. Here again, perhaps there is some ambiguity. Two years ago, I had a sabbatical in Greece and visited a very small island called Lipsi, situated off the coast of Patmos where St John had the vision he recounts in the book of Revelation. I was very moved in the parish church by the devotion of the sacristan: an elderly lady who looked after the church and welcomed visitors. Greek Orthodox churches are of course covered in icons of the saints and at 12 Noon, she went around with a small bowl of burning incense and just offered it quietly as a prayer at each of the principal icons in the church. It was a very beautiful but entirely natural and unself-conscious act of veneration to the living family of saints that those icons represent.

But if offering incense can be very beautiful, for many of the earliest Christians – including perhaps early readers of St Matthew's gospel in the early second century it may have been loaded with some connotations of fear. After the Roman emperors had started to proclaim themselves as gods, the litmus test of your loyalty to them was often whether you were prepared to burn incense in front of an image of the emperor. Christians and Jews were not willing to do this and suffered severe consequences.

And then the third and final gift of myrrh also perhaps has mixed associations. At Epiphanies past, when I've had to do children's talks about the wise men and their gifts, myrrh is always the difficult one to get hold of. Gold, particularly in the form of chocolate coins are easy to come by, and always appreciated. Incense and the means to burn it is generally available in church. But finding myrrh is somewhat more of a challenge.

I've normally had to take myself to somewhere like Neal's Yard to buy it in a little bottle. Its strong medicinal odour is sometimes used to calm people down in aromatherapy sessions and such like. But although in the ancient world kings and priests were anointed with myrrh, another use was to prepare bodies for burial when its pungent aroma masked the smell of decaying flesh. And so, like gold and frankincense myrrh has an ambiguous side to it. This is a gift to the baby Jesus that points towards his later suffering, crucifixion and burial. As the third king in the well-known carol memorably sings, 'myrrh is mine its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying, sealed in a stone-cold tomb'.

So each of these gifts – for both ancient and modern hearers of this gospel – have their ambiguities; all contain rather mixed messages. They're brought in love and reverence for sure but in each one there is also perhaps a touch of

irony and complexity, some notes of uncertainty; some sense fear and foreboding about the future.

Some of the best loved Christmas carols – including my favourite one In the Bleak Midwinter – seem to provide a promising way through these ambiguities. They tell us that, although we may not, like the Magi, have gold, frankincense and myrrh to bring to the infant king, we do have something else to offer that is in the end more valuable: the gift of our hearts. It's a lovely thought and expressed in some very moving musical ways. And yet of course our hearts are quite as uncertain as any other gift. Whether in worship or other aspects of life, we find it difficult to be whole-hearted; to be committed, faithful, clear in our intentions. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah – not for sure the most optimistic person who ever lived – 'the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?'

Perhaps though we are getting it the wrong way round. In today's gospel, we are told that on entering the house, the wise men immediately knelt down and paid Jesus honour. Only after that did they open their treasure chests and present their own gifts. Their primary concern was not what they were bringing to Jesus – that was entirely secondary. What was infinitely more important was the gift that God had given them in Christ the newborn king at his Epiphany. May we receive this gift afresh this year, and may the life and light of Christ accompany us in our own journey through the two thousand and twenty sixth year of his birth.