

“When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.’ After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and, on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:1-2; 9-11).

The story of the magi and their visit to the infant Jesus forms an essential part of our celebration of Christmas. While it is often included in our nativity sets on Christmas day, we mark this special event with its own holiday within the Christmas season, the feast of the Epiphany, a word meaning the revelation or discovery of the truth.

There is much truth to be discovered in the story of the magi, but it is wrapped in symbols and images, images like the strange gifts that the magi give the infant Jesus. Each gift symbolizes a different aspect of the truth about who this child really is. The gold is a gift for a king, as the magi set out to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews. But Jesus is not a worldly king like Herod; he is a king of a different order, symbolized by the other two gifts. Frankincense is used for divine worship. By presenting Jesus with this gift, the magi reveal his divine nature. Jesus is the Word made flesh and splendor of the Father. He is Lord, not of some paltry political power in backwater Palestine, but of all heaven and earth. And to bring his kingdom, the Kingdom of God, into being, he would give his life for his people. This is the meaning of the third gift, myrrh. This precious oil was used at that time to anoint the bodies of the dead, much like Mary Magdalene would later go to Jesus’ tomb to do. By offering Jesus this gift, the magi anticipate his great sacrifice which would completely transform the world and turn the powers of the world upside down.

As we celebrate again this great feast, take some time to ponder the meaning of the magi’s gifts. Reflect on the truth about who the child we celebrate at Christmas really is and profess your faith anew in Jesus, our king, our God, our saving sacrifice.