

Sunday January 5, 2025  
Epiphany Sunday

**Sermon:** Gifts Most Rare

How many people gave or received gifts 11 days ago?

What were some of the special gifts you gave or received?

I was thinking the other day about some of the gifts I gave and received. I received some stem ginger marmalade and a Christmas ornament with Samson's handprint.

I gave a fire-retardant blanket, a stuffed lion and socks.

And then there were all the food items I made that are part of our family tradition – cranberry relish, snowball cookies, Christmas pudding and hard sauce.

What, I wondered, was the significance of these things.

Marmalade, relish, cookies and pudding are all items that give pleasure, and that comes from knowing the individual.

A stuffed lion, a fire-retardant blanket are about care for others.

Socks are about comfort for the recipient.

All of them are about relationship. If we didn't know what gave another person pleasure, or comfort, or care for another person, the gifts either miss the mark or may seem foolish. But if we know the person, we know what will give them comfort or pleasure, or we will want to express care for them.

The wise men took gifts to the baby Jesus: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Frankincense is one of the four ingredients used to make the incense that was burned in the tabernacle. It was very expensive. It came from Sheba - the south-west corner of the Arabian Peninsula, what we know in the present day as Yemen. Frankincense had its own special storeroom in the treasury of the temple.

Myrrh was used, mixed with oil, to anoint kings at their coronation. It too was a precious gift, for it too was very expensive. Myrrh also came from Sheba, or from tropical Africa.

Gold well, that speaks for itself.

Did the wise men know that Jesus was the son of God?

Did they know that his strength would be his weakness?

Did they know that his power would be his vulnerability?

Did they know that the weapon he would use to conquer the world is love?

Did the fact that he was wrapped in swaddling cloths, burial strips, give away the end right from the beginning? Myrrh, in addition to being used to anoint kings when they ascended the throne, was also used to prepare bodies for burial.

Did they know he would die at the hands of the Romans at the behest of the Sanhedrin? Did they know that Jesus would suffer a painful death?

Frankincense is also an hallucinogenic. It was mixed with wine and given to those condemned to death so that they would feel no pain. Remember the sponge of sour wine raised on the tip of a spear to Jesus' lips when he hung on the cross?

Did the fact that he was laid in a feed trough indicate right from the start that people would feast on his body and on his blood?

We could debate what the wise men knew till the cows came home.

What they did know was that this was a special child, who would one day be great. They paid him homage – respect, special honour.

The gifts were rare and of great value, and spoke to the nature of the honour they paid to Jesus, the nature of their commitment, and the depth of their awe.

And none of the gifts says a whit about the fact that these wise men picked up and left everything and everyone they knew to follow a star for two years because they expected to meet someone who would change the world. Talk about commitment. Who among us would leave home and family and friends and everything and everyone we knew to go on an adventure for God knows how long to God knows where because we expected to meet someone extraordinary?

The gifts we give and receive speak to the depth and the nature of our relationships.

Think about the gifts God has bestowed upon you. What do those gifts say about the depth and nature of God's relationship with you? What do the gifts that you present to God say about the nature of your relationship with God? This week, think about the nature of your relationship with God, and what your offerings have to say about your relationship with God. God has richly blessed us, how are we doing in return?