

AND OPENING THEIR TREASURES

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EEKING, SEARCHING and even demanding may well describe the modern trend towards "informative" information. We want not only the "bare bones" of headlines, but also a telescopic peering into the "news behind the news." Even then, complete satisfaction comes only with further and fancier commentaries upon the national and international horizons. "It must mean more than that," is our eternal and practiced reply to almost any simple statement which we read or hear in the field of journalism. And quite often we are correct in our surmise. The principle lying behind this myopic curiosity most probably rests upon the belief that reasons will be found giving us an incalculable measure of security of mind for the present and a golden mean for future thought and action.

The present-day attitude to the "good news" of Sacred Scripture, the God-given word, is unfortunate in that it so far excludes any desire towards further knowledge through the commentaries and exegetical works. With a mere repetitive grasp of the literal sense of the Sunday Gospel and Epistle, we seem to garner an absolute satisfaction. Yet there is a striking parallel accompanying the disclosures of Scriptural commentaries and the results of the surgical dissection of modern events. In both cases we seek clarity and insight. Yet the fecundity of thought and the practical references contained within the pages of Scripture are ageless in their import, and hold the remedy that insures peaceful and virtuous living in this world, and life eternal hereafter.

THE GOOD NEWS

A striking yet often ignored proof of this fact is evident in the simple Gospel story of the Three Kings who came to Bethlehem, saw the stable, and were conquered by love for the infant Jesus.

In a distant land far to the east of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the magnetic voice of a star swelled forth to call these three whose soundless steps across the desert answered in eager recognition of the heavenly bid to follow. Their journey ended when the star "stood over the place where the child was." This is the prologue to the royal reverence tended by the Three Kings to the Infant Saviour. St. Matthew

goes on to relate that "entering the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they worshiped him." Then they offered sensible forms of adoration, and it is these gifts which have captured our attention. For the narrative continues: ". . . and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." This is the fact recorded by St. Matthew and duplicated in pageant and symbol through the centuries since that time. This is the headline, so to speak, that stands in bold relief before the eye; the simple testimony of a paradoxical movement of the heart—paradoxical, because men on thrones had stepped down to worship at the foot of an Infant's crib. But what lies behind the simple truth of this headline? We may glean a great deal from the analyses of the commentators upon Holy Scripture concerning the mystical signification of the "treasures" of the Wise Men.

EARLY REPORTS

The Magi were really priestly scholars, devoting themselves not only to religion but also to the study of natural science, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and astrology. In some countries they were members of the king's council. Very early in Christian times popular tradition gave the title "Kings" to the Magi who came to Bethlehem. By the year 500 A.D. the tradition had become universal, and passages of the Old Testament were accommodated to the popular belief. We can, however, learn much more about the Wise Men from the gifts they offered at Bethlehem.

The *Gloss of Anselm*, written about the year 1100, suggests that in the offerings we may observe "their (the kings') national customs," gold, frankincense, and various spices abounding among the Arabians. This same commentary goes on to say that we may find a deeper meaning; for the gifts also "intended to signify something in mystery."

At this juncture in the unfolding story of the Wise Men, the simple narration of the facts becomes, through the meditative insight of the exegetical writers, an interpretive study which unseals the 'mystery,' the mystical import of the gifts.

St. Gregory the Great, who reigned as Pope about the year 600, stated that the gold was intended for a king, the frankincense as a sacrifice to God, and the myrrh as the embalming matter for the dead. St. Augustine had made this latter reference to myrrh more tangible by saying that it was given "as to one who is to die for the sins of all." St. Gregory goes on to a further elaboration of the mystical sense, echoing in his commentary ancient inspired verses of Solomon

and David. The wisdom of which Solomon spoke in the Proverbs (21, 20): "A treasure to be desired is in the mouth of the wise," is again symbolized by gold. The frankincense, which is burnt before the altar of God, typifies the power of prayer, a figure found in the Psalms (141, 2): "Let my speech come before Thee as incense." And through myrrh, Gregory sees a true example of the mortification of the flesh.

Fitting all of these together into a moving trilogy of personal sacrifice, St. Gregory concludes: "To a king at his birth we offer gold, if we shine in his sight with the light of wisdom; we offer frankincense if we have power before God by the sweet savor of our prayers; we offer myrrh when we mortify by abstinence the lusts of the flesh."

The internal dispositions of the Wise Men also have been pondered over by exegetes in their effort to uncover the complete story of the first Epiphany. St. John Chrysostom holds that the *mystical* import of the gifts was unknown to their royal bearers. Yet the integral unity of the offering was preserved by the fact that "the same grace that instigated them to the deed, ordained the whole"; for, as St. Thomas later explains, we believe that they were specially inspired by the Holy Ghost. Nevertheless, the *basic* connotation was not unknown to the Kings. St. John Chrysostom confirms this assumption by stating that the swaddling clothes and the stall amply proved His presence in the flesh, while the gifts themselves proved that He was adored not as a mere man, but as God. He quite justly refers to the Kings as "those progenitors of the Church, adoring God in the flesh."

A MORE PROFOUND ANALYSIS

These analyses of the mystical meaning of the gifts, proposed in the writings of learned men in the early Church, seem confusing when read out of the varied contexts in which they were originally written. It remained for St. Thomas, with his brilliant and clear penetration of mind, to take these seemingly disordered interpretations and arrange them in an intelligent pattern.

St. Thomas approaches the *mystical* interpretations of the three gifts by first examining the *literal* meaning of the events as they are recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel. He first proposes that the offering of the gifts was prompted by a free desire on the part of the Wise Men to show reverence to the Infant. He then concludes, from the nature of the gifts they offered, that the native land of the kings was Persia or Arabia, pointing to the Psalms as a corroborating proof. For in Psalm 10 we read: "The kings of Tharsis and the islands shall

offer gifts; the kings of the Arabians and Saba shall bring gifts." (Placing these geographical spots as they appear in modern times, we might choose Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, or India. The number of Wise Men is also open to conjecture. Early Christians held as many as twelve and as few as two. The traditional belief of three, based upon the fact of the three gifts, had become universal in both the East and the West by the sixth century.)

The Angelic Doctor, after this brief commentary on the sacred text, continues with an appraisal of the mystical tenor of the passage. He first rejects certain primary interpretations suggested at once by the very nature of the gifts. It had been proposed that the gold was intended to alleviate the poverty of the Holy Family; incense to serve in improving the atmosphere of the stable; and myrrh to strengthen the weak limbs of the Child. While such a theory would be valid on a purely *material* basis, St. Thomas holds that the three gifts principally foreshadowed *mystical* realities. Inseparably attached to the three gifts was a reference to the three things which we ought to offer to Christ: *faith*, *action* and *contemplation*, and these correspond to the three spiritual senses of Scripture to be mentioned later.

Our gift of *faith* St. Thomas viewed as arising from three different sources, each in reference to some aspect of the person of Christ. We give gold as a compliment to His royal dignity and thereby show our faith in His title as Christ the King; incense, the traditional symbol of sacrifice, refers to the magnitude of His Priesthood, and our faith in Christ as the Supreme Priest is thus affirmed; in myrrh we proclaim our faith in Christ as Victim of this sacrifice and restate our belief in Him as true God and true man. Still regarding the gifts under the aspect of an offering of *faith*, St. Thomas shifts the emphasis to the number of gifts, and in the three-fold giving sees a foreshadowing of the revelation Christ Himself would make of the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity.

Human activity, which forms the pattern of our lives, is the medium through which we offer our second gift to Christ. Within this positive area of sensible expression, *action*, St. Thomas sees an explicit equation to each of the original gifts. The first bestowal man makes to Christ, prefigured by the *gold*, is wisdom or rather the search for wisdom. In support of this, St. Thomas cites the Book of Proverbs (2, 4-5): "If thou shalt dig for her (wisdom) as for a treasure, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord." The word wisdom is used here in the sense of an *understanding from the viewpoint of God* which has brought to the life of man a deeper insight into the mysteries and designs of faith and subsequently, through the

impetus of love, overflowed into vital expressions of charity. This inclusion of wisdom under the heading of action will be discussed again later. St. Thomas then assigns the second gift of the kings, *incense*, as an integral representation of our prayers. And he cites Psalm 140, 2: "Let my prayer be directed as incense in thy sight." The final gift of man to Christ, a living example of the bitter *myrrh*, comes forth in the mortification of the flesh which man, through love and contrition, imposes upon himself. This is a gift of self-inflicted reparation for the torments that the Son of Man unjustly suffered on Calvary.

The Angelic Doctor, in placing *contemplation* as the third gift of man to Christ, first views this gift in reference to the three spiritual senses of Sacred Scripture. Each sense, according to St. Thomas is a gift in itself, and when properly used merges, like all true gifts, with the giver. Hence, our discernment of Scripture is broadened as we begin to realize that the Old Testament is a figure of the New (allegorical sense or *faith*); it is deepened when we see that the things that Christ did and suffered are signs of the deeds we ought to perform and of the sufferings we can expect to endure (moral sense or *action*); it is enriched as we come to an understanding of how the Old and New Testaments are symbols giving us some hint of the great joys to be found in heaven (anagogical sense or *contemplation*). Then we can walk the roads of supernatural contemplation, using our gifts of intellect to grow in the knowledge of God.

St. Thomas, building upon the *Gloss of Anselm*, sees a second reference to the natural contemplation of philosophy. For him the study of ethics is something golden, while logic is like incense used in the service of God. Natural Philosophy, in the sense used here, includes Cosmology, Psychology, and Metaphysics. It is symbolized by myrrh, for a profound study of Natural Philosophy requires the mortification of discipline. Perhaps a modern philosopher knew of this symbolism when he entitled a chapter of a book "The Grandeur and *Misery* of Metaphysics." St. Thomas justifies this sense by the simple statement: "for, all these we ought to use for the service of God."

IT MUST MEAN MORE THAN THAT

A difficulty arises in the postulation of wisdom as a facet of action since the ordinary acceptance of this gift would seem to place it in the realm of contemplation. Perhaps the problem can be resolved by probing into the symbolic interpretation of another text of Scripture.

In chapter twenty of St. John's Gospel, after the myrrh had its first fulfillment in the death and burial of Christ, John and Peter are described as racing to the tomb from which Christ had risen a short time before. The Evangelist relates that, while the race was won by John, it was Peter who took the first steps into the inner room where Christ's body had rested, without any visible interruption in his rapid pace. Then, the Gospel narrative adds, "that other disciple also went in who came *first* to the sepulchre." And it is in these words that we find the point of contrast between the two Apostles. St. John, standing outside the tomb waiting, according to the Angelic Doctor, represents those who linger upon the cool heights of contemplation, drawing refreshment from the well of truth; St. Peter personifies the man of action, burning with the fire of obedience to the commandments and counsels of God, urged on in a constant outpouring of vital energy. The comparative aspects under which the contemplative and the active souls operate frequently results in the contemplative, by reason of his docility, arriving more quickly at a knowledge of the mysteries of Christ, even though he may be negligently slow to enter into their whole spirit. The promptness and attention usually found in an active soul makes up for his slowness in penetrating deep mysteries and precipitates a literal "rushing in" to a deep love of God which brings with it the discovery of the truths of wisdom. The contemplative remains at times overlong on the knowledge of God, the door to love, as St. John stood outside the tomb. But St. Peter, illumined by the wisdom of the Saviour's love, immediately joined to this a selfless act of love. Therefore, St. Thomas notes that wisdom should be included under the heading of action, for in its perfection it is a light which will not only illumine the mind of man, but through its intensity will radiate forth in all his actions.

TOWARDS FUTURE THOUGHT AND ACTION

The mystical treasures contained in the story of the Wise Men are in many ways an appeal to the mind and heart of modern man. What they did nearly two thousand years ago on the first Epiphany, can be a living example to all in choosing a gift in gratitude for the blessings that came of Christ's Birth, Life and Death. It is true that today the Wise Men seem to be but figures that blend into the beautiful panorama of the Nativity story. They rest now in the eternal repose of the past. Their presence is gone from the sight of men, but their place in the plan of Redemption was to be a sign that Gentiles would one day be incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ. Their story, as a story, is incapable of addition. But the mystical good

news is still with us, a vibrant, salutary, and hope-giving truth. It is in this sense that we can profit from the three gifts. For by uniting the lessons of the gifts to our lives and presenting this new outgrowth of our offering, we will complete the promise contained in the first offering long ago.

Perhaps without realizing it, we give a perpetual gift to God by our assent to the mysteries of the Incarnation. *Faith*, as a gift given by God to man, is returned to the Omnipotent Donor by a willing and humble submission to the mysteries of God's inner life. With each whispered *credo* we return this gift to the Source of all good things. For this gift, in the form of our assent to truth believed but not understood, is not a static thing, offered once a year at the foot of the crib of the Babe of Bethlehem; but rather it is a constant reiteration, as steady and ceaseless as the very beating of our hearts.

St. Paul, in the thirteenth chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians, concludes with the words: "And now there remain *faith*, *hope* and *charity*, these three . . ." *Hope*, the second gift which the Giver of all good things has bestowed on us, can likewise be returned to its Source. This is best expressed, perhaps, in our gift of prayer. In hope we find the impetus for prayer; for without hope we would be bound in the iron circle of futility and despair, from which no voice of petition, gratitude or adoration can break forth. Prayer, in fact, is the language of hope. Following the simile of St. Thomas, we can discern an affinity between the acts of prayer and the gift of incense presented by the Three Kings. As the incense draws life from the spark that lies beneath it, igniting and sending it forth; so the act of prayer receives vigor and cogency from the heart that burns with love and hope. Tracing the ascent of the smoke of incense, we can also follow the course of our prayer: both are deliberate, unhurried in their ascent to the altar. Yet, as the incense, having filled the sanctuary, enriches the hallowed place with its fragrance; so the answer to our prayers gives added fragrance and renewed hope to our lives.

The final gift that is ours to give on the feast of the Nativity is the gold of *wisdom*. This is truly a treasure of gold; for like that precious metal, hidden deep within the bowels of the earth, sparkling in a sunburst of light when uncovered, wisdom too rests within the hidden chamber of the mind until it is joined and fused by the fire of *charity*. Then we see wisdom, the most noble of our gifts, united to love, the greatest of the virtues. Our knowledge gained by the gift of wisdom, pierces the Source of all good, and in understanding we move to a yet greater love of that same Source. Only by following

the swift course of action perfected by the golden wisdom of charity, can men reach the Nativity of eternity. For it is love that rushes into the tomb in search of the One True Lover, and it is love filled with wisdom that is our gift of gifts, our treasure without price. For this reason the words of St. Paul conclude: ". . . but the greatest of these is *charity*."

The season of gifts need not come but once during the year. Holding fast to the ideal of the wise men, with them 'opening *their* treasures,' now *our* treasures, we will discover that each day can become, truly, the act of love that *is* the Christmas season.

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