



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

January 3, 2021
The Second Sunday of Christmas

Solemn Eucharist
11am

+

A Sermon by
Father Mark Brown

on
Matthew 2:1-12

+

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas

A friend and I happened to have a visit planned to the Metropolitan Museum Cloisters last Monday. And being aware that I would be preaching today on the Adoration of the Magi, I started seeing Adorations of the Magi everywhere: in sculpture and bas relief, in painting and fresco, carved in ivory, carved in wood, woven into cloth. One that caught my eye in particular was a stained glass medallion about the size of a large dinner plate in a lancet window. The baby Jesus is sitting on his mother's lap. One of the Magi is kneeling before him holding a box--about the size and shape of a cigar box--filled with shimmering gold coins. The baby Jesus reaches a chubby little hand into the box as if he might like to see what one of these shiny round things tastes like--as babies do.

The story of the Magi is a mere sketch of a story. But that hasn't kept artists and poets and composers from embellishing and filling in the gaps—or simply using it as a point of departure. T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors" come to mind. And Messiaen's 20 Meditations on the Infant Jesus [*Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*] for piano solo. Or, representing a completely different musical universe, James Taylor's song "Home by Another Way"—inspired by the Magi, and accompanied by what sounds like a Hammond organ, electric guitars and a harmonica.

The embroidery and flights of imagination began quite early. The Magi were quickly assigned gender, number and names—and were even anointed kings retroactively. The Greek word behind the word Magi just means any number greater than one, and could refer to men only or some combination of men and women. That someone decided there were three probably reflects the three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The names Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior—well, that's the human imagination at work. The gifts came to be seen as symbolic: gold symbolic of Christ's kingship, frankincense symbolic of his divinity, and myrrh foreshadowing his burial.

How the Magi became kings is more complicated. Magi in the ancient world were actually astrologers and practitioners of the arcane and occult arts; that they were said to be "from the east" suggests Persia or Babylon. Or perhaps even farther somewhere along the ancient Silk Road.

Whatever Matthew intended, his story of the Magi has been the source of a veritable flood of inspiration down through the centuries, especially in that vast zone where the aesthetic and religious imaginations overlap. And although sketchy in details, it is multi-layered and can be read in different ways.

One way we can read the story is as a parable of transformation, a parable of personal transformation. They went home by another way. Not only by a different road, but by another way, in another way. And not merely because of a warning in a dream, but because they themselves had been changed. Having seen a new light and set out on a long and arduous journey, seeking the source of this light, risking all, not counting the cost—they were changed. And having knelt before the Christ child in adoration and worship—they were changed. And having offered him their gifts—they were changed. Even had they exactly retraced their steps, they would—in this spiritual sense—have gone home by another way.

We've come before him again today. And, oh, the places we've been, the people we've met along the way, the hardships we've endured, the joys and loves we've shared on our journey! We've come to worship him. And he has come. He has come bearing a gift: the gift of himself.

The wise men opened their treasures, it says, worshipping him and offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And they were changed—they went home by another way and in another way. Their oblations were transformative; all giving is transformative. We offer our gifts of time, talent and treasure, as we often say in the Church. And we are changed—giving changes the giver.

But Christians are invited to go further—a step further which will be the most transformative oblation of all: the offering of our very selves. As he gives himself to us, we give ourselves to him: ourselves, our souls and bodies. In a few minutes we'll hear those familiar words in the prayer of consecration: "*And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...*" [BCP p.336] The most transformative gift of all. We will go home by another way. It is not only the bread and wine that are consecrated in the Eucharist: it is also we ourselves. "*Thou didst give thyself for me; now I give myself to thee.*" Words of one of our hymns [Hymnal 1982 #313].

Our transformation in Christ is not an abracadabra sort of thing. We may not even notice. Spiritual growth and transformation unfold over time and usually in small increments. An occasional growth spurt, perhaps, but usually a kind of gradual and organic process.

In giving us the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, Christ has given us the means, the opportunity, the occasion, week by week, year by year, even day by day if we like, to make, to renew, to reaffirm that oblation of our selves, our souls and bodies. Sometimes our self-offering will be with great intensity. Sometimes in a feeble, distracted, half-hearted way without much warmth of feeling. But he understands—the Eucharist is very much a come-as-you-are kind of celebration, distracted or not. But listen, listen deeply to those words we say over and over again, week by week: "*Here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves...*" Our selves.

This is the most transformational gift of all. But transformation into what, exactly? St. Irenaeus, the second century bishop of Lyon put it this way: "*He became as we are, that we might become as he is.*" He—the very source of all light and life—became like us—chubby little hands and all—that we might

become like him: risen, ascended, glorified. St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians: “...*we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*” [4:15]. Into the “*full stature of Christ*”, as he puts it [4:13]. The 2nd Letter of Peter speaks boldly of our becoming “*participants of the divine nature.*” [1:4]

Well...in God’s good time and eternity—when we finally see him face to glorious face. For now, it’s probably little things, little changes; the inconspicuous, incremental transformations of this earthly life. It’s unlikely we’ll astonish our friends and neighbors—but one never knows... But, having come before Christ and worshiped on bended knee, we too shall go home by another way, in another way, as people changed, consecrated, transformed. “*Behold, I make all things new.*” He said.

In closing I’ll offer that Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas that we prayed at the beginning of our worship. Let us pray...

*O God, who didst wonderfully create, and yet more
wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant
that we may share the divine life of him who humbled
himself to share our humanity, thy Son Jesus Christ; who
liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen. [BCP p.162]*