The Gifts of the Magi

Both the astrologers and their gifts are rich in symbolism

A FEW Christmases ago the Family Planning Association put up billboards round the country portraying a randy young trio with condoms in their back pockets as “three wise men”.

Taking sensible precautions to prevent infection and unwanted pregnancy is one thing. Wisdom, a quality of maturity, judgment and depth, is quite another. We can also be sure that the three wise men of the Christmas story did not ride to Bethlehem bearing condoms. They are in a totally different league from the randy threesome. The billboards were in poor taste, however effective they may have been in promoting the safe-sex message.

So who were those wise men? And why does the writer of Matthew’s gospel bring them into his story?

Intriguingly, Matthew does not say there were three, nor that they were kings, or even wise men. He calls them magi – that is, astrologers. Most of the details in Christmas cards and carols owe more to the fertile imagination of the church in later centuries than to Matthew’s narrative.

By the 3rd century, for example, their number had settled at three. By the 6th century the astrologers had become kings. Another 200 years and they had names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. They were, furthermore, a young man, a mature man and an old man, and each hailed from a different part of the known world – Europe, Africa and Asia. The reasoning behind these embellishments is obvious: the wise and powerful of every continent owe their worship to Christ.

Later again the three kings were invoked to protect against ghosts, demons and misfortune. Medieval bell-makers stamped their initials “C”, “M” and “B” on church bells to ward off storms.

As astrologers, the magi studied the stars for messages from another world. To their understanding, an unusual star or star formation pointed to some great event, including possibly the birth of a king. Seeing such a star, the magi set out to find him.

The clue to their presence in Matthew’s account lies in the rare and precious gifts they brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh. From the time of the early church these were symbols pointing respectively to Jesus as king; as one worthy of worship; yet as a man who was mortal and would one day die.

The gold suggests wealth and power, and in ancient societies it was associated especially with royalty. In the gospel genealogies Jesus was a descendant of the royal House of David, so gold was a gift fit for a king.

Frankincense was used by priests in making an offering to God. It comes from the Boswellia tree that grows in Arabia, the Horn of Africa and Iran. Gatherers of frankincense would slit the bark of the tree to allow a pale yellow sap to ooze out. After three months it was hard enough to be collected and sold as resin.

Priests burnt frankincense on the altar, assuming that the fragrance it gave off would be as pleasing to God as it was to them. So frankincense was a gift appropriate to one who, long

before Matthew wrote his gospel about 85 AD, was being proclaimed as sharing somehow in the divinity of God.

Myrrh was another aromatic gum. It comes from the fearsomely thorny Commiphora tree, which grows in Arabia and Ethiopia. Again the bark is cut to let out a yellowish gum, which becomes dark red or blackish as it hardens, and is bitter to the taste. The resin was powdered and used in perfumes and incense, but chiefly in an ointment for embalming the dead.

As we read the story today, myrrh points forward from Christmas to Jesus' death at the first Easter. When Matthew wrote it, however, he was pointing back beyond Easter to Jesus' birth: the crucifixion had occurred about 50 years earlier, and everything Matthew wrote was in the light of that.

Symbolically, then, this gift of the wise men linked Jesus' birth with his death. In myrrh can be seen a portent of his death and embalmment; in the spikiness of the myrrh tree a foreshadowing of his crown of thorns; and as the Roman soldiers prepared to crucify Jesus they offered him wine mixed with myrrh to deaden his pain (which, for the record, he refused).

So the magis' myrrh was a gift for a flesh-and-blood baby who, as a man, would die a bitter death; and that is what Matthew conveys through this story.

Alongside all that, Family Planning's ad was cheap and tacky.

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