

Epiphany 2023

8.1.23 Mary Mags

Della is a young wife in early 20th C New York, wonderfully in love with her adored husband James, scraping by on the 20 dollars a month which he brings home, 8 dollars of which goes to rent the tiny flat where they live. The day before Christmas she looks at the one dollar and eighty-seven cents that she has scrimped and saved to buy James a Christmas present, and she weeps at its inadequacy. Then, catching sight of herself in a mirror, she has an idea. She runs into town, finds an establishment selling “hair goods of all kinds”, and asks what the lady will give her for the lengthy cascade of her beautiful hair. Twenty dollars is the answer, and the hair is duly cut off. With the money Della finds what she wants most – a platinum fob chain for James’ most prized possession, the watch which had belonged to his father and his grandfather.

On returning home, James is horrified to see her hair all gone. She pleads that it will grow back, but the reason for his reaction becomes clear. He has bought her, for Christmas, the gorgeous and expensive combs that she had long coveted in a Broadway shop window, just the shade to wear in the beautiful, vanished hair. She attempts to relieve

his sadness by presenting her gift, the magnificent watch chain, only for James to reveal that he sold the watch to get the money for the combs, combs for the hair which was sold to buy the watch chain.

William Sydney Porter, who wrote under the name O. Henry, ends his story thus:

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

The Biblical word “Magi” is not perfectly translated as “wise men”. As far as we can tell, magi were a priestly caste of ancient Persia, with a reputation for interpreting dreams. By the time of the New Testament, they have come to be seen as privileged possessors of superior

knowledge, rather like those we call “soothsayer”. When these mysterious eastern visitors, whom we would now call Zoroastrians, come to Jesus, they are representatives not just of the secret truth which the readers of the gospel already know – that this is the true King of the Jews, the messiah anointed by God – but also of the entire wider world, of the Gentile nations which will come to the truth of the God of Israel through the one who will save his people from their sins.

We call people wise in very different contexts. A narrative introducing a wise man or a wise woman probably makes us think of someone rather strange, perhaps oddly dressed, probably set apart from ordinary society, probably living a different sort of existence. But a description of a friend or colleague as wise has none of these connotations, just the suggestion that they are someone of thoughtful knowledge and judgement, who is probably a good source of insight or advice.

These wise men bring gifts – gold for kingship, incense for divinity, myrrh for anointing in death. They anticipate the fate of the child who now lies helpless in the manger. But the gifts and their symbolism are secondary to the act of giving itself, for it is that which will reveal to use the truth

about God, it is giving which will provide the epiphany, the manifestation, of what it means to talk of “God with us”.

As so often in the gospels, the human perspective is being turned on its head. Quite who is giving and who is receiving, and what it is that is manifested as gift, is what we need to learn. The mystical objects brought by the original magi may sparkle and smell of a world beyond our own, but the reality of Emmanuel, of God with us, is the child who lies in the feeding trough. The Magi have come looking for the one who is born King of the Jews, and that phrase is so very familiar to us from our carol services and our nativity plays that we fail to notice that it is not used again in Matthew’s gospel until it is hung above the head of the one who is dying on the cross.

Divine wisdom, the wisdom of God, is the wisdom of giving, and the giving which is divine is absolute – selfless, complete, poured out perfectly in love in the life of God we call the Trinity, poured out perfectly in love for the life of those who are brought into being, created, by that love. The Epiphany teaches us that we see God, we find God, in the helplessness of a new-born, in the vulnerability of self-giving which can and will receive no reward or recompense.

In the story, Della and James are truly the Magi precisely because of the failure of their gifts. They give a chain where there is no watch, they give combs where there is no hair. What is left is not an outcome, not any practical or aesthetic effect, what is left is simply the giving, the act of love, the action which is focused entirely on the other, the act which knows nothing of self.

The gift of God in the child of Bethlehem is the perfect offering which we - wise or foolish – are unable to make. God with us is God for us. Giving is divine wisdom.