

I saw three ships...
Epiphany 2021 Bristol Cathedral

As you will know if you have seen the new Bristol cope, or heard my installation sermon, I have been much taken with nautical imagery since coming to the Cathedral so it is perhaps not surprising that my Christmas earworm has been the carol,
I saw three ships.

I've always assumed that it was a thirteenth century carol, so I was surprised to find that the first English version was not collected until the 17th century and not widely published until the early 1800s when the first verse was usually printed
As I sat on a sunny bank
among broadsheet collections of carols.

I saw three ships is interesting as it contains a number of anomalies, for example Bethlehem is landlocked, so an unlikely destination for a ship, and the ships carry Mary but also in some versions she is accompanied by the adult Jesus rather than Joseph, singing, whistling or playing the pipes.

Despite its late appearance in English collections, the most likely origin for the carol is indeed from the 13th century, if, as scholars assume, it refers to the three Kings, or rather their relics, being carried up the river Rhine to the city of Cologne where they had been gifted to the city by the Emperor Frederick Barbarosa. Cologne cathedral was built as to house the relics and to create a pilgrimage site. The huge golden reliquary in which the bones were placed can still be admired today.

So the three ships carried three kings, and the bringers of gifts became a gift and in turn attracted even more gifts, including three gold crowns from the German king Otto.

Placing the story of the three Kings in this context reminds us of the transactional nature of most gift giving. In this case, the relics were taken from Milan and given to Cologne as a way of gaining political favour.

The cathedral was built around them not simply to give glory to God,
but to attract pilgrims and income to the town,
and no doubt King Otto thought that the gift
of the golden crowns would win him friends
among the local populace.

Far back into history gift giving has been a ritualised means of gaining favour or of demonstrating loyalty. For a weak nation like Israel, giving gifts, or paying tribute, was a familiar routine, as scarce resources were used to protect the security of the little nation. Indeed, to push the point home, we are told that Mary and Joseph have gone to Bethlehem to be counted so that they can be taxed. Soon they will be giving money to the Roman authorities on top of the taxes they already pay to the temple.

As in so many ways,
we see the Christmas story
turning the way of the world upside down,
so the myth of the three kings
turns gift giving up side down.

Here is Israel, the Kingdom
personified in the baby in the manger,
a child with nothing to give in return,
yet these foreign Kings are coming to him
to pay him tribute.
What can the child of a carpenter possibly give to these
wealthy, cosmopolitan rulers, magicians or scholars?

What they see, and we know,
is that he has already given them life
and that he is destined to transform that life for ever.

This is a completely different kind of gift giving,
it is transformational.

The gift that has been given by God,
the saving gift of himself,
is so far beyond our means or power,
that there can be no fitting response.
The Kings could give their entire kingdoms
and they would represent just the tiniest part of the
glory of the world that is God's gift to us in Creation.
So these foreign Kings have not come to pay tribute,
or taxes, but to bring gifts
gifts that show that they have glimpsed something
of the world changing, life transforming, gift that is Jesus.

They see him,
that is the meaning of Epiphany,
a manifestation or appearance,
of something previously hidden or unknown
revealed or become clear.
They see and *understand* something of the importance of
this child.
Their gifts are not tributes or attempts to win favour,
they are symbols that show that they recognise that this
is more than a baby,
that he is king, priest and sacrifice.

Of course, they cannot know the full meaning of this at
the point of their meeting,
this is a mystery that takes a lifetime to grasp.

One of my favourite Christmas stories is that of
the Other Wise Man, a novel by Henry Van Dyke
published in 1895, which tells the story of Artaban,
the wise man who does not make it to the stable and
wanders the Middle East in search of the new king,
giving away the jewels that he had intended for the baby
to the poor and suffering.
Eventually he finds himself on the outskirts of Jerusalem
where a crucifixion is taking place.

As Artaban gives away his last pearl to free a young slave
girl, a tremendous earthquake knocks the tiles off a
nearby roof and he is struck on the head.
As he lies dying,
convinced that he has failed to find the Messiah
he hears a voice saying to him,
“In so far as you have done it for one of these my
children, you have done it for me.”
He dies knowing that his gifts have been accepted
by the one true King.

We can very easily fall into the trap of transactional
giving
even in the face of the gift that is so far beyond our
grasp.
How often do we calculate what is “just enough” to put
in the collection plate or maintain our good reputation?
How often is our giving, of our time, money or
resources, carefully calculated so that it makes no impact
on our life, savings, or everyday pleasures?

I know how much I struggle to give away enough of
myself, my resources, my time,
to know that I have given of my best
rather than just the “good enough”.

The three kings are a powerful mythological symbol of the best, the most beautiful, the wisest, the loveliest, being laid at the feet of God.

They invite us, this evening
and at the beginning of this new year,
to commit again to give the best of ourselves
and the best of what we have,
to honour the giver of the greatest gift of all,
the gift of life and love for all creation.

Amen