

**Msgr. Dennis Sheehan**  
**Homily Given on January 8, 2006**  
**The Epiphany of the Lord - Liturgical Year C**

What did you get for Christmas? Questions like that are great icebreakers. We use them often, more often perhaps with children. We like the way their eyes light up as they tell us about computer games, snowboards, and animals. Try turning the question in a different direction. Ask sometimes, as I'd love to ask: What did you give this year for Christmas? Sometimes youngsters will stammer a bit. Their parents probably took care of a lot of that task. Others might think a bit, then tell you what they picked out for Mom or for Dad – and more importantly – why.

Sometimes the gifts are unusual. One teen said he gave his sister a promise of respect. That was a surprise – and priceless. Another told how she broke her parents' coffeemaker and gave them a replacement – thoughtful. One older teen told about her dad. He realized his children didn't really need what money could buy. So each year he gave what he found hardest to give – his own time and attention. A day together at the Science Museum or Killington on a ski trip. That's some unusual gift when you consider we live in a nation with more shopping malls than high schools.

What's the point of giving gifts anyway? Most of us could probably buy what we get for ourselves. Not children, to be sure. But the point of gift-giving shouldn't stop at the gift. The point is that, with thought, care, and personal sacrifice, the gift becomes a real giving of ourselves.

Part of the origin of gift-giving at Christmas is today's story of the Magi who journey to Bethlehem. In many European countries, Epiphany is still a gift-giving day.

In Jesus' case, the gift-givers in the Gospel were probably astronomers. They came from the "East" – maybe Persia or modern Iraq. Tradition says there were three, though the story talks about three gifts. There well might have been four or fourteen gift-givers.

I invite us today to focus on those three gifts. First the Magi knelt down, the Scripture says, and paid Jesus homage. These are men who have journeyed long and hard. They are visionaries, learned and cosmopolitan. They kneel in simple awe. Their awe and wonder find expression in three unusual gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The first gift – gold – is not so rare or valuable in their world. I'll hazard a guess that its value here in the Gospel comes from its use in jewelry and ornamentation. Gold is a gift given because it is beautiful.

Frankincense is the second gift. We burn it today as incense. It has a heavy, sweet smell. It was often used in ancient animal sacrifice to mask the smell of blood and death.

Finally, we are told, the Magi offer myrrh. Like frankincense, myrrh is a fragrance. In the ancient world, it was common to use myrrh in preparing a body for burial. It was also sometimes mixed with wine as a supposed opiate against great pain.

Now, if I'm Mary and Joseph, I'm a bit mystified by the choice of gifts. No Pampers, rattles, or silver cups. No, they bring jewelry, perfume, painkillers, and embalming spices. I'm a bit confused.

It's probably a bit clearer if we go back to their awe. They are so overcome, so rapt in ecstasy, they reach for what is most valuable. The gifts say as much about them as they do about Jesus. That's where we come in. We're here today, presumably, because in some faint way, we share the awe and wonder of those Magi seekers. What then will we offer?

Gold? (The finance committee would love me to close in for the kill here, but I won't.) It's not about gold or even dollars. It's about each and every one of us learning to be in awe of a God who does so much. Learning something of that awe, it's about reaching for what we treasure most and giving it. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it well: "Rings and jewels are not gifts but apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself.... Therefore, the poet brings his poems; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, salt and shells; the painter, his picture."

What's in your treasure chest or mine? Perhaps it's money, but maybe it's time. Pride, perhaps? A grudge? The Magi opened chests with gifts because first they opened themselves. Their gifts spoke of awe and wonder. What will our gifts talk of? Sorrow? Desire to be different?

This is a great day for opening hearts. Epiphany gifts are very little if they don't come from the gift of ourselves. Here are some suggestions of gifts from an open heart:

Keep a promise. Keep a secret. Share a dream. Send a flower. Let someone have a last word. Return a smile.  
Laugh at her favorite story – again. Let someone in line ahead of you. Listen to a child. Say something nice to someone you like. Say something nice to someone you don't like.

Don't wait until you have the perfect gift – for God or another. The woods would be a quiet place if only the best birds sang. Give what you have and discover the Magi's secret. They found Jesus, the Savior, and so can you or I.