

Sunday 30th January 2022 – The Gift of Prayer & Worship (Luke 1:5-13, Revelation 8:1-5)

I wonder what helps you to pray? Do you like silence or background noise, be it nature or singing? Do you prefer to make up your own words, or use others'? Do you like to light a candle, kneel, or walk around? Do you repeat phrases, or spend more time listening than speaking?

Prayer is a universal human need and activity. Even in our so-called secular society, 70% of the population admits to praying. And this figure would no doubt be higher in many parts of the world. And because prayer engages us with an unseen Being, we often like to have visual aids to help us do it: be it light, or sound, or smell.

The use of incense in prayer and worship is one thing that you'll find in many religious cultures, including Hinduism, Taoism, Shinto and especially Buddhism. It was also an integral part of Jewish worshipping life, as we'll see in a moment, but although these religions all believe different things, one thing that does connect them is the idea that smoke rising from burning incense makes a wonderful representation of our prayers being offered to God. We can imagine the plume wending its way up to heaven.

This is particularly the case with the Altar of Incense in the Jewish temple. It is three and half feet high, which would place the burning incense at mouth-height for someone kneeling, as would be customary in prayer. Being selected to burn incense for evening prayer was a great honour: many priests would only get the chance once in their entire priestly lives, as the lot fell to them. And as Zechariah entered the temple to do so in our gospel reading from Luke, the connection between incense and prayer is made explicit by the fact that worshippers were praying outside (v10).

And it was *then*, as Zechariah was right by the altar of incense, that the angel told him his prayer had been heard. Imagine the visual impact, not just of seeing the angel, but of seeing the 'smoke' of his prayers, as it were, literally being answered! It makes his doubt a bit less excusable, although he is a very human character that I guess many of us secretly identify with!

We conclude our series today on the gifts of the Magi. As we mentioned at the start, we usually look at the gifts from the point of view of what they tell us about Jesus, and I don't want to lose this. It's important to remember that St Matthew wants us to connect these famous spiritual travellers with the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 60, where rulers come to offer gold and incense to the newly restored people of God.

But I actually think that Matthew has another passage even more in mind than Isaiah 60, and that is a few chapters earlier in Isaiah 53, and in particular verse 12. This is the most famous Messianic prophecy of all, at least for Christians, because it foretells of a suffering Saviour, who will give his life, that we might be forgiven and healed. But how does this chapter end? 'Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.'

Here, I believe, we have not just two, but **all three gifts of the Magi foretold**: gold for the spoils of victory, myrrh for his body ‘poured out unto death’, and frankincense for the prayers he now offers on our behalf, or ‘intercession for the transgressors’, as Isaiah puts it.

It’s an amazing thought that **Jesus is now praying for us, right there with the Father in heaven**. Hold on to that thought whenever anyone promises to pray for you and then forgets – Jesus doesn’t!

And in our other passage in Revelation we get an extraordinary vision of the power of prayer from the heavenly perspective. Now the bowl of incense is not just in the temple, it’s right up by the throne of God. And just as on earth, the prayers of God’s people are like incense – they are mixed together, and they cause things on earth to change. John talks about thunder and lightning, but this is picture language to encourage us that **our prayers really do make a difference**. Stuff happens because we pray.

So as we reflect today on the power of these gifts of the Magi for our own lives here on earth – we’ve looked at gold representing the power of generosity, at myrrh representing the gift of surrender to God, and finally, today, frankincense representing our life of prayer and worship.

And what I want to share today, is that encouragement **to make prayer part of our diet through the week, and not just on Sunday**. Just as they burnt incense at the altar in the temple *every day*, so our lives can be fuelled by prayer and praise day-by-day. So, briefly, some practical tips:

First, the best advice I was ever given in prayer was this: pray as you can, not as you can’t. In other words, start where you are. If you can manage 5 minutes, start there. Don’t set your sights too high and then beat yourself up because you didn’t get there.

Second, find your language. In church we use lots of beautifully worded prayers, and that’s great for services. But prayer is really the outpouring of our hearts. Speak to God as an authentic expression of you. If you find it easier to use scripted prayers, that’s fine, they’re there for a reason. But use your own words if you can, because God isn’t interested in your grammar or your vocabulary! He’s interested in *you*.

Third, experiment until you find a prayer diet that works for you. There’s so many ways to pray, but we’re all different. The only real test is whether it’s drawing you into the presence of God and enabling you to offer everything to him. So whether it’s stillness or noise, sitting in a chair or walking and talking, learning things off by heart or making it up as you go along: if it’s offered to God and it’s stuff he can sign up to – don’t pray for a lottery win! – then it’s OK. If your diet is feeling a bit tired: try something new!

Prayer is the engine room of our lives. It’s fuel for our journey. It’s so easy to think of it as wasted time, or something we only do if we’ve got time after all our jobs. But **put prayer first and you’ll find the time always comes back to you**, usually more than you gave. God always repays.

And so may the Magi’s gifts be ours this year. And may God grant us all grace to sit at his feet and find fuel for our journeys, day by day. Amen.