

Fr. Tom Lucas, rector of the Jesuit Community at Seattle University, gave this homily in the Chapel of St. Ignatius on Sunday and then again with the Arrupe Jesuit Community. He delves into the mystery of the Epiphany and the gifts of the Magi to reveal the healing balm of God's mercy and love poured out for all—especially during times of trial, upheaval, and sorrow.

Guide Us to Thy Perfect Light

“Then you shall be radiant at what you see,
your heart shall throb and overflow, (Isaiah 60)

....

“And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them,
until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.

They were overjoyed at seeing the star,
and on entering the house
they saw the child with Mary his mother.

They prostrated themselves and did him homage.

Then they opened their treasures
and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

(Matthew 2:10-11 Reading for the Epiphany)

Strange, unlikely gifts for a poor family on the brink of fleeing for their lives, no? Some commentators say that these were easily convertible luxury goods, that the Holy Family then sold to finance their journey into exile. Some point to their exotic places of origin, Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Sheba, as a sign of universal recognition of a precious, divine infant. Others dismiss the story all together, no star, no kings, no camels: only a metaphor. Yet those gifts, whether real or metaphorical, have something to say to us, even now. For they are gifts we still receive in this community, still possess in this community, still cherish in this community, still spend in this community. Let's look at each.

Harvested from a scruffy thorn bush, myrrh is an aromatic sap the ancients used in medicines, in powerful poultices to heal wounds. When mixed with incense, it cut the cloying sweetness with an earthy, almost bitter undertone. It was sometimes used, as we hear in the Gospel of John's account of the execution of Jesus, for embalming the dead.

This moment in the life of our society, our church, and in the life of nations, is a time of Myrrh. “Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying” we sing in “We Three Kings.” In the past months we have experienced that in the shame we as Catholics have been forced to face anew. There is so much that needs to die away: cultures of privilege and carelessness, of self-interest and self-protection. Those cultures need to be laid to rest. And there are wounds self-inflicted and inflicted by others, sorrows and wounds that still desperately need to be healed. We need this gift of myrrh, this medicine whose bitterness is also strangely sweet. We need to acknowledge and own and confront death and diminishment around us in our church, in our society, and apply the healing poultice of bittersweet repentance and forgiveness.

Despite all this, this moment in the life of the church and in this community is still a time of Incense. We believe that our prayers continue to rise like incense, fragrant with hope, up to the very throne of God. Our community still gathers, confesses its faults, sings, prays, reflects, and gives thanks. Still we proclaim the praise of the Lord. I have lived in many Jesuit communities in the past 43 years, yet I have never lived in one in which the Eucharist was so much the center of its very being, its heart. Day by day, week by week, year by year still we gather, confess our faults, pray, reflect, give thanks, and even sing, howsoever haltingly. Amid the stench of our sinful world and not withstanding our weakness and sometimes complicity, still we acknowledge and receive its sweet Lord, born in the humility of Bethlehem, who was crucified, died, and buried, and risen as firstborn from among the dead. And our prayers and praise and petition still join with those of all our brother Jesuits and with those of people of good will across the globe. Those prayers rise up to the heavens, even to the very stars, a fragrant cloud of hope that renews our hope.

Finally, despite all we think we know to the contrary, this moment is still a time of Gold. Not the gold of Fort Knox to be locked away, nor the golden filaments in our computers, nor the gilded ceilings of basilicas, but the gold of pure and purified generosity. In this unity and fraternity, in this *communitas*, we witness to and share a golden faith in the generous goodness of God revealed in Mary’s son. We have been given and share golden hope in the One who makes all things new. We have been given and share golden love for the One who rose from the myrrh-scented tomb. If we are to be faithful to those golden gifts of faith, hope, and love, we must do what Jesus did: share them as once the mysterious Magi shared them with the Holy

Family; give them away for the healing, sanctification, and dare I use the word, for the “embellishment” of our world.

Metaphor or real, finally it doesn't matter:

the Magi show us the way following a

“star of wonder, star of night

Star with royal beauty bright”

We bring our gifts as they did:

the bittersweet myrrh of healing repentance;

the fragrant hope of our worship in this community,

and the gold of generosity lived out day by day in simple service.

And so we pray,

“Westward leading, still proceeding

Guide us to Thy perfect light.”

Fr. Tom Lucas, S.J.

Arrupe Jesuit Community

January 6, 2019